

Isaac Asimov

Isaac Asimov (Editor)  
Poul AndersonTom Boardman (Editor)  
Lloyd Biggle, Jr.Brian Ball  
John W. Campbell (Editor)

Richard Cowper

John Carnell (Editor)  
Kenneth F. Gantz  
H. L. Gold  
H. L. Gold (Editor)  
Harry HarrisonHarry Harrison (Editor)  
Robert A. Heinlein

Damon Knight (Editor)

Henry Kuttner  
Keith LaumerFrank Belknap Long  
Fritz Leiber  
Angus MacLeod  
Alan E. NourseEdgar Pangborn  
Frederik Pohl  
Frederik Pohl and Jack Williamson

John Rankine

Eric Frank Russell

Arthur Sellings

Jack Vance

A. E. van Vogt  
Kate Wilhelm  
John Wyndham

I, ROBOT  
THE REST OF THE ROBOTS  
FANTASTIC VOYAGE  
NINE TOMORROWS  
THE MARTIAN WAY  
THE HUGO WINNERS  
PLANET OF NO RETURN  
SHIELD  
S F HORIZONS 1  
THE FURY OUT OF TIME  
ALL THE COLOURS OF DARKNESS  
SUNDOG  
ANALOG ANTHOLOGY  
ANALOG 3  
ANALOG 4  
BREAKTHROUGH  
PHOENIX  
NEW WRITINGS IN SF  
NOT IN SOLITUDE  
THE OLD DIE RICH  
THE WEIRD ONES  
WAR WITH THE ROBOTS  
SENSE OF OBLIGATION  
BACKDROP OF STARS  
THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS  
THE MENACE FROM EARTH  
PROFESSION OF JONATHAN HOAG  
FARNHAM'S FREEHOLD  
THE DARK SIDE  
CITIES OF WONDER  
FURY  
WORLDS OF THE IMPERIUM  
THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME  
IT WAS THE DAY OF THE ROBOT  
THE WANDERER  
THE EIGHTH SEAL  
THE COUNTERFEIT MAN  
TIGER BY THE TAIL  
DAVY  
SLAVE SHIP  
UNDERSEA QUEST  
UNDERSEA FLEET  
THE REEFS OF SPACE  
STARCHILD  
NEVER THE SAME DOOR  
INTERSTELLAR TWO-FIVE  
ONE IS ONE  
SINISTER BARRIER  
MEN, MARTIANS AND MACHINES  
THREE TO CONQUER  
THE GREAT EXPLOSION  
FAR STARS  
DARK TIDES  
WASP  
WITH A STRANGE DEVICE  
SOMEWHERE A VOICE  
NEXT OF KIN  
THE LONG EUREKA  
THE QUY EFFECT  
THE SILENT SPEAKERS  
THE UNCENSORED MAN  
THE DRAGON MASTERS  
STAR KING  
THE KILLING MACHINE  
ROGUE SHIP  
ANDOVER AND THE ANDROID  
JIZZLE

New  
Writings  
in SF13

NEW WRITINGS IN SF13

Edited by

John  
Carnell

John Rackham  
Vincent King  
John Baxter  
David Kyle  
Sydney J. Bounds  
M. John Harrison  
David Rome  
Eddy C. Bertin

Dobson  
Science  
Fiction

Edited by John Carnell

Dobson Science Fiction

## NEW WRITINGS IN SF 13

*edited by*

JOHN CARNELL

NEW WRITINGS IN SF 13 is a successful *new* departure in the science fiction field, bringing to lovers of the genre, new stories specially written for the series by well-known as well as new authors. Its presentation exclusively in volume form is the next step forward in expanding the SF short story from the limitations it has suffered in magazine publication during the past thirty years and introduces international authors writing for a far wider audience than ever before. This thirteenth volume includes stories by John Rackham, Vincent King, David Kyle, John Baxter, Sydney J. Bounds, M. John Harrison, David Rome, Eddy C. Bertin.

*Jacket design by ERIC AYERS*

18*s net*

## ANALOG ANTHOLOGY

*edited by*

JOHN W. CAMPBELL

ANALOG is one of the best known and most popular science fiction magazines in the world and any anthology culled from its pages will be a good one. This particular anthology is outstanding in size and content.

Originally ANALOG ANTHOLOGY appeared in America as three separate books, but we felt that combining these (without cuts) into one giant volume would make an attractive and at the same time unique collection of SF stories by well-known or up-and-coming writers.

*Guaranteed to keep even an addict quiet for a pretty long time.*

Demy 8vo

30*s net*

This first collection has now been followed by

ANALOG 3

Demy 8vo

21*s net*

ANALOG 4

Demy 8vo

25*s net*

ANALOG 5

Demy 8vo

25*s net*

*Printed in Great Britain*

SBN 234 77161 5

NEW WRITINGS IN S-F is a successful departure in the science fiction field, bringing to lovers of the *genre*, new stories specially written for the series by well-known as well as new authors. Its presentation exclusively in volume form is the next step forward in expanding the S-F short story from the limitations it has suffered in magazine publication during the past thirty years and introduces international authors writing for a far wider audience than ever before. This thirteenth volume includes stories by John Rackham, Sydney J. Bounds, David Kyle, Vincent King, M. John Harrison, David Rome, John Baxter and Eddy C. Bertin.

*By the same Editor:*

No Place Like Earth  
Gateway To Tomorrow  
Gateway to the Stars  
The Best from 'New Worlds'  
Lambda I and Other Stories  
Weird Shadows from Beyond  
New Writings in S-F 1 to 12

# NEW WRITINGS IN S-F

13

*Edited by*

JOHN CARNELL

LONDON: DENNIS DOBSON

Copyright © 1968 by John Carnell

All the characters in this book are fictitious  
and any resemblance to actual persons,  
living or dead, is purely coincidental.

## CONTENTS

	<i>page</i>
<i>Foreword by John Carnell</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>The Divided House by John Rackham</i>	11
<i>Public Service by Sydney J. Bounds</i>	61
<i>The Ferryman on the River by David Kyle</i>	79
<i>Testament by Vincent King</i>	97
<i>The Macbeth Expiation by M. John Harrison</i>	115
<i>Representative by David Rome</i>	137
<i>The Beach by John Baxter</i>	155
<i>The City, Dying by Eddy C. Bertin</i>	167

First published in Great Britain in 1968 by Dobson Books Ltd.,  
80 Kensington Church Street, London W.8

SBN 234 77161 5

Printed in Great Britain by Richard Clay (The Chaucer Press), Ltd.,  
Bungay, Suffolk

## FOREWORD

by

JOHN CARNELL

THERE is a strong international flavour among the authors in this thirteenth volume of *New Writings in S-F* and the calibre of their stories is just as outstanding as in previous volumes; four British, two Australian, one American and one Belgian, all presenting new previously unpublished material.

The theme of John Rackham's novelette, "The Divided House", is one which has long intrigued anthropologists. Did *homo sapiens* stem from one basic ancestral line—or were there two separate and individual proto-men? If two, did the dominants overthrow the recessives or merge with them (if you cannot fight them, join them) or did the weaker, like the monsters of the mesozoic, die out through environmental changes? London author, John Rackham, extrapolates the possibilities to show that there *could* be an Orwell-type of "1984" dominance, although we are more concerned with the type of human who *would* make a Big Brother.

Belgian writer, Eddy C. Bertin, twenty-two years old, devotee of Bradbury and Ballard, collector of some 2,500 books of weird and fantasy fiction, presents a complex closed-environment story, in "The City, Dying", which is enhanced by his use of typographical experimentation. Written originally as a short short story for a Belgian Literary contest, it was later revised, lengthened and translated into Dutch; then revised again and translated into English. It is a grim story showing what might happen in the future with a dominant Police Force.

Completely different is young London professional M. John Harrison's "The Macbeth Expiation", a tense psychological chiller of an exploration team on an alien planet. At one time a trainee groom in a hunting stable, then a student teacher for two years, he recently turned to full-time writing as a career and is presently at work on a novel based on his story "Visions Of Monad" which appeared in *New Writings in S-F* 12.

Our two professional Australian authors, David Rome and John Baxter, both of whom appeared previously in our pages, present light-relief stories to the heavier European plot-approach in "Representative" and "The Beach" respectively. Since his outstanding story "Apple" in No. 10, John Baxter has been working mainly for the Australian Film Unit as Press Officer.

Vincent King returns with yet another completely different type of science-fiction story, both in presentation and theme. "Testament" could be a cosmic joke on us all!

Which leaves two new authors to introduce, although both have been professionals for many years. American author David Kyle had his first S-F story published as long ago as 1941. Since then he has had many others in various magazines, illustrated book jackets, been a freelance writer, radio announcer—and crossed the Atlantic eight times to attend British science-fiction Conventions! His "The Ferryman On The River" is an off-beat story about a collector of human lives—and the reason why.

Fighting fire with fire is Sydney J. Bounds's theory in "Public Service", another big city complex theme. Once, many years ago, the author worked in the engineering department of London's Underground system but gave it up for the more precarious life of a full-time writer.

As professional or semi-professional writers, all the authors in this volume have something special to say—which gives science fiction that extra-dimensional pattern of thought as well as action.

November 1967

JOHN CARNELL

## THE DIVIDED HOUSE

by

JOHN RACKHAM

*Have you noticed that most of humanity is divided into two distinct categories—the "doers" and the "thinkers"? But what makes them do so? And what might happen if one type became dominant?*

## THE DIVIDED HOUSE

### ONE

THE control room, with its white-faced array of instruments telling of the universe outside, had become a comfortable, familiar place. Gareth Harker, sprawling now in a contour chair, glanced round it with a sharpened eye as he reflected that they would not be seeing it for very much longer. Within forty-eight hours, give or take a few minutes for pardonable error, the long journey would be over. Like so many other ventures that seem to extend infinitely into the future at the time of starting out, this one, now, seemed to have gone very quickly. He felt regret in a gentle way. It had been a good trip. Not dramatic; not overly exciting even; just steady and workmanlike. A good trip.

He turned his head now, silently, to study his companion for this watch period, and to marvel all over again at the old mystery, at the way people were different. Dennis Selkirk. A man, just as Harker was a man. In his thirties, as they all were. Educated, trained, civilised, squeezed out by the same mould? Harker smiled at the thought. The six of them had left Earth in Orwell's year, 1984. Their ship was *Space-Farer IV*, one of ten such ships, each with a hand-picked crew, each sent out into a different sector of the infinite that stretched away from Earth in an ever-expanding globe of mystery. Sixty people all selected by the same rigorously efficient process. But—the same mould? Harker smiled again as he compared himself with Dennis, and knew the differences. And they were more than just physical. Harker was large-boned, placid, a deliberate man, much given to rummaging at length through his own thoughts, whereas Dennis Selkirk was lean almost to gaunt-

ness, was restless except as now, when he was half-sleeping, and with a mind that needed some meat out there to chew on.

Selkirk snorted suddenly and came fully awake like a cat. "Dozed off," he said, stretching. "Keep doing that, lately."

"No reason why you shouldn't, Dennis. There's very little to do now."

"Right. Almost over. Still, a man ought to be able to keep his mind on the job. What were you thinking about?"

"Not much," Harker murmured, thinking that here was another facet of the difference. Of the rest of the crew, only Olga would have asked that same question. The others, Gerda and Jane, and Yoshi, they wouldn't use such a term, or think such a thought. "The old thing, Dennis. Musing about the differences between us. We've had time to learn them, in three years."

"I've told you before, Garry. It's Snow's 'Two Culture' effect. He laid hold of a very significant thought when he wrote that. People have this imbalance, this feel for things, one way or the other. Arts and humanities and the enigma of man's condition—or science and technology and the universe of energies and particles. Facts on one hand, fancies on the other."

"You being a fact man, of course," Harker thought, not unkindly. "If only it was that simple," he said aloud. "But you have scientific art, the science of humanities—and you have philosophic scientists. And doctors, you know, who must be scientific, and human, at the same time."

The argument had no teeth in it, was just an exchange of pleasantries that had gone on, with minor variations, for a long time. It was interrupted now by brisk footsteps and the entrance of Olga Sverdlov. Even if she had not developed the habit of visiting the control room every "morning" just at this time, he would have known who it was coming. By the feel. Of medium height and darkly vivid, she was very like Selkirk in many ways. And she scared him a little. They both did, when he cared to think of it, when he reminded himself that he had not the faintest idea

what went on inside her head. She and Selkirk. You had to go by what they said. The others, now, were different.

"Good morning," she said brightly. "Breakfast in ten minutes." And then she stretched forward to tap the time-lapse gauge and cock her head at it. "Forty-eight hours to go, and the margin-of-error is now down to plus or minus eight minutes. Nearly home!"

"The obvious!" Harker thought, even as he returned her smile. "They have to say the obvious!" In that moment, as in odd flashes in the past, he felt close to being able to isolate something crucial, but it faded, as it always did. Fifteen days ago the watchful mechanisms had warned them it was time to turn round and head for home if they wanted to get there before their resources ran out. And for fifteen days Olga had been checking the time-lapse every morning and announcing the hours. As if all six of them didn't know, didn't automatically count every dwindling minute, as the ship slid through the formless grey nowhere of non-co-ordinate space in the grip of the quantum drive. Obvious. And it could have been irritating, except that six people locked together within the narrow confines of a world the size of an old-time steam train had to learn how not to be irritated if they were to stay sane over three years.

"Yes," he said, and smiled, "nearly home. We must start thinking about the moment. Odds and ends to clear up, get our reports in order. They'll want digests and summaries to start with." He heaved up out of his chair and followed her and Selkirk through the hatch and along to the dining-room space, pausing by the auto-chef to collect his regular meal. Their preferences had been programmed into the machine long ago. Gerda Fromm and Jane McLean were already seated, close-headed over a chart they'd put out between them on the table. They looked up to nod and smile as the others sat.

"Where's Yoshi?" Selkirk asked, sitting at the end of the table. "Talking to the computer again?"

Gerda shrugged her ample shoulders. "I think so. He said

something about a new calculus for the time-contraction estimates."

"A new one?" Olga took up her edged fork and held it ready. "You mean the estimates could be erroneous?"

"Not grossly," Jane looked up to explain. "As you know, we have recalculated the relativistic distortion each time we've jumped from one system to the next, and with fourteen systems to draw data from we have the effect reasonably determined. A sharp value. Yoshi thinks he has found a way of sharpening it a bit more, that's all. It will still be about one hundred and twenty years, plus or minus a month or two."

"It's a disturbing thought." Harker stared at his plate and frowned. "We left in nineteen eighty-four. For us, that was three years ago. For us, the day after tomorrow ought to be April of nineteen ninety-one. That's long enough, in all conscience. But it will be, in fact, some time in twenty-one oh-four. We knew that before we set out, but it wants believing, still."

"Yes." Gerda put the common thought into words. "All the people we knew will be long since dead."

"Now there's a thing!" Selkirk gulped a mouthful hurriedly to give room for a chuckle. "We all dwell on that aspect of it. That all our friends and colleagues will be dead and gone. But there are a thousand more interesting things to speculate about. Now's our chance to guess the future, but do we? No, we grieve, secretly, that the world we knew will be . . ."

"Speak for yourself!" Jane interrupted warmly. "What d'you think this is?" She stabbed a finger down at the spread sheet between herself and Gerda. "We have been charting that same future. We didn't talk about it, didn't want to until we had it in some kind of shape. It hasn't been easy . . ."

"A moment!" Harker interrupted in his turn. "Before you show us, may I guess? I've done a considerable amount of thinking on this same subject. I have seen it as a necessity, if only to forewarn us against making silly and irritat-

ing mistakes. And to occupy my mind." He added that in full awareness that they would understand. With a new star, a new system of planets to be scanned, with instrumental readings to study and cogitate over, with precious data gathering and being stored in the memory banks, tedium was kept at bay. But over these past days, knowing it was all over and that they were going home, tedium had come to be a real force, an enemy at everyone's shoulder.

"My guess comes in several layers," he said, into their attentive silence. "First a negative. That you have not been able to predict—to extrapolate, as they used to say, just where the scientific and technological factors will have gone. Right?"

Jane grinned. She was dark, like Olga, but impish and deep. To her the interactions of number and logic were fascinating, a game. "That's not as clever as it sounds, Garry. Physical sciences, the chemistries and biochemistries, biology—it's obvious that those can't be predicted."

"Not to me, it isn't," Selkirk objected, and Olga was scowling as she shook her head.

"Obvious? How? I would have thought the factual aspects were the most predictable, surely? After all, technology, which is based on science, is largely prediction."

"And calculation?" Yoshi Hideki spoke from the hatchway where he had been listening. Now he came to take his seat. "You have an intriguing idea there, Gareth, but can you formalise it?"

"Let me," Jane begged. "I think I can, but I'm terrible at putting things into symbol form. You should see my notes!" Here Jane did herself less than justice. Mathematics, symbolic logic and sociology were her specialist subjects and her expertise, carefully camouflaged, had helped keep these six in fair harmony throughout the trip. Yoshi Hideki was all mathematician, was the cosmologist of the group; Harker the medical man and father-figure; Gerda the chemist, biochemist and a born mother-type; Olga took charge of everyone's physical health, diet, exercises; and Selkirk did likewise for the health and workability of the

complex of machinery which held their lives in safety. And all were skilled at any one of a dozen lesser disciplines, all trained to be observant. But it was Jane who knew most, in her own way, about how the human organism functioned.

"I'll try an analogy," she said thoughtfully. "Suppose we say science and technology are like a game of cards, a system for combining and recombining a given set of facts and achieving all the possible variations. On that sort of basis you can predict to a degree what ought to happen. But, as the history books show, research keeps on inventing a new card or two, a wild card that cancels something, or changes the rules. You know the names. Copernicus, Kepler, Galileo, Newton, Einstein . . . would you agree so far, Garry?"

"Absolutely. I couldn't better the simile myself. If we could call up Newton right now, he would be totally lost. But now, if we could call up Socrates, say, who lived two thousand years or so earlier, and make him familiar with our language, he would find very little change in the subjects for argument, or the values. Have I anticipated you?"

"A little," Gerda nodded, in her deep contralto that went so well with her blonde Rhinemaiden appearance. "Human behaviour changes, too, but basic drives remain constant. Going back to the card-game, no matter what the wild cards, the aim is the same. To win. To achieve a desire. The fascinating question is, what desires will be left, still, to strive for? The crude ones, shelter, security, enough to eat, were almost worldwide when we left. We can assume those are now complete."

"The swing," Jane took up the account again, "was towards permissiveness. Pressures were coming off. Regimentations were beginning to break down. Sex differences were fading."

"But that couldn't possibly be sustained," Olga objected quickly. "Men and women *are* different, inherently."

"In structure and function, yes. So is an arm and a leg, but if you favour one against the other you'd be in trouble,

you know that. Sex differences were dying out. Remember the crazy swings of fashion? The skirt that shrank and finally disappeared altogether? And why? Because a 'skirt' was the one garment specifically female, in name and function. I will gamble that, right now, there is no specific difference in dress between male and female, that either sex can and will wear anything. And the language! That will have changed to match. You see, words carry implications. Men—and another kind of men. Male—and another kind of male. First and second. Original and copy. I am gambling there will be a shift to permit a side-by-side implication."

She was well into her hobby now, and Harker leaned back with a grin to catch Yoshi's eye. "You've been recalculating our ETA. Anything significantly different?"

"No. Forty-six hours to break-out, and we should be well within our own system by then. From there will be up to Earth Control."

Harker nodded, then sat forward and rapped the table for attention.

"I'm sorry to break up a most interesting discussion," he apologised, "but the time is fast approaching when we will be called upon to account for our actions. People are going to want to know what we've done, where we've been and what we've found. We shall know that it isn't going to sound much, but it is up to us to prepare all our findings in digest form, as well as to get our formal records into proper order. And we have forty-eight hours. I suggest we start at once. No point in leaving things to the last minute."

It was in his mind to utter a fervent hope that, after all this time, Earth had not forgotten the S-F ships, but he decided against it, saved the gloomy possibility for his own mind. It was still there, in the background, as the computer-set mechanisms spun their last few circuit-cycles and then twisted *Space-Farer IV* out of quantum-space back into the snail's pace universe of Einsteinian space-time.

"Will they remember us?" he wondered, watching the viewscreens glow into life with the jewelled splendour of many stars. They looked very much the same as before, but

then a century or two was very little time, for stars. It was a devil of a long while in human history, though. A long time. He watched the busy instruments sensing and reading off radiation counts, plasma densities, star-images, mass stresses and all the complex geometry of establishing their precise location. This, the technology, was Selkirk's field. Harker could read the language well enough to be able to detect "danger" or "emergency", but there were none here. The ship pulsed and began to shudder under the nudging of a reaction-drive that had been quiescent since their last intrusion into a planetary system.

Harker let his chair take the fluctuating stresses, and thought back, back three years. All at once they seemed dream-like and unreal, hard to believe. Had they really spent three whole years flea-hopping from one blazing star to another in their empty quest? And empty it had been, apart from a wealth of close-up observational data of great value to astronomy and astrophysics. Fuel for the cosmology theorists. But a glorious waste of time in any other sense.

And yet, not quite. A thought came back to him, made him frown and then smile ruefully. There had been that one odd planet, of a star so small and insignificant that it had only a number in the catalogues. He remembered it well enough. A green and gold ball, sparkling with the reflections from seas and dappled with cloud-layers which looked pretty but hampered observation. It had looked enough like Earth to make them homesick, and the ban on landing, on any contact-interference, had never seemed so hard to obey. So they had struck orbit and used the immense power of their probing equipment. And found nothing at all unusual, nothing to indicate "life" down there. Nothing, except a very odd uneasiness that deepened into a positive feeling and became a message so clear that it didn't need verbalisation. Something down there told them, in strong but polite terms, to "go away and leave us in peace".

Harker could feel it again now. Gerda had felt it, as had Jane, and Yoshi. No doubt at all. But not Dennis Selkirk, nor

Olga Sverdlov. Not only had those two not felt anything, they refused to believe the others had. They had ridiculed their companions for being fanciful. Olga had uttered dire and almost threatening words about diet, as if this multiple fancy was some odd affliction of the alimentary system. And that, Harker mused, was just one more way in which people were different. Because it had not been fancy, but quite positive, just as positive as the way in which he could "feel", right this moment, that Jane and Yoshi were hovering over the computer-console, four bulkheads back, and that Gerda was assisting Olga with the radio equipment, in readiness for the anticipated break-out. He could be certain. He could "feel" Gerda, could feel, too, the companionable "touch" she sent back to him in awareness of his thought. And he knew Olga was there by a quite different process, because she had to be, by routine—because he couldn't feel her at all, except to know she was there.

Nor could he feel Selkirk, who was right there by him in the co-pilot seat. He could sense him as a solid, living object. He could, by turning his head, see him with the naked eye. But he couldn't "feel" the personality that was Dennis Selkirk, at all. So there, definitely, was a quantitative difference. This inexplicable and indefinable ability had grown among the four ever since they had taken the silent hint and departed from that odd planet. It had grown just as if that first contact had burst some barrier, or stimulated some latent talent. They had played with it, cautiously and with consideration, not wishing to probe too far, to violate anyone else's privacy. Enough to know that it was real. So, Harker smiled again, they had brought back something. But was it anything that could be explained?

A crackle in the intercom by his head dislimmed his musings and Olga reported. "I have the Lunar Beacon plain, and a ghost which may be Earth Control marker. It's the right spectrum but too faint yet to be positive. Lunar is good and strong, though, no doubt there."

"Good," he said. "Match it into the circuits as soon as you can. It's up to you and Yoshi now, Dennis."

"All good here," Yoshi reported smoothly. "Course-data over to you on the read-out, Dennis. I make it three hours eighteen minutes by our plan, but Earth may be able to shave that a trifle."

Selkirk was busy, his hands making delicate movements, his eyes restless over his slaves. After a few careful stares and one last adjustment, he threw a switch and clicked his tongue.

"All is Go, so far. I've got us on the auto-helm, following course. It will do until we get within ground-control range. How's the voice-contact, Olga? Can you give 'em a shout, let 'em know we're home?"

"What do you think I'm doing?" she demanded crossly. "It's anybody's guess what frequencies they will be using now, if any. I am getting nothing but fuzz at the moment." A busy crackle grew up around her words. Harker waited anxiously, rocking to the heave and thrust of the reaction-drive as the jets jostled and nudged the ship into approach-path. Then her voice came again, riding over the sizzle.

"I have something. It's not very clear, but I have the wavelength, and they should hear us plainly enough. Putting it over to you, Captain Harker."

"Captain?" Harker echoed wryly. "That has a strange sound, after all this time. Very well, when you're ready."

Technically he was senior, and in charge, and therefore "Captain". But if anyone was the type to take charge and issue orders it was Selkirk. In everything but the name Selkirk was in charge right now. Sensors took in data, the radio might bring in guidance and commands, and Yoshi, with the computer, would translate and re-route them to this control panel here. But Dennis Selkirk was the man who could make or break the whole thing. These white-faced gauges and meters were his slaves. Still—Harker waited, saw the transmit "green" come on, and reached for the call microphone, took a steady breath, gathered his thoughts.

"Hello Earth. Hello Earth Control. This is *Space-Farer IV* Gareth Harker commanding and speaking. Do you read?

*Space-Farer IV* to Earth Control, do you read? Come in, please."

The carrier wave burbled inscrutably for some seconds, then let loose a scratching chatter that made him wince. Then a voice, harsh and crisp.

"Is Earth Control here. Is speaking. To speak to *Space-Farer, Fourth* in one hour from now, again. Data for come-down will be given at that time. To speak at that time to Crom Selkirk or Crom Sverdlov only. Stop."

The chatter cut off abruptly, leaving only the indifferent burble of space. Harker frowned, then touched a switch.

"Olga. What did you make of that?"

"I heard it. What's a Crom? Dennis and myself, apparently, but what?"

"Something to do with the engineering aspect, possibly." Harker mused. "If they've slipped grammar that far, it's possible they've slipped several other things. Dennis?"

"It's a guess." Selkirk muttered, looking unhappy. "I hope it's wrong. On paper it's possible for me to bring this thing down alone, but I'd hate to have to do without some kind of assist from them."

"Please!" It was Yoshi, who had never quite lost his ancestral bent for politeness. "I think I can clear up something of the mystery. I have put that transmission through the analyser. You remember, we have circuits designed to identify intelligent sound communication, in case we ever met any? Well, the indications are that the message we received was synthetic. Made by a vocoder. A robot, in fact."

"Oh, well," Harker shrugged. "No sense in buying trouble. Perhaps it's programmed to talk to engineers only. One hour, eh? It's up to you, Dennis. It would be up to you in any case, so there's really nothing in it. Can we leave it to the auto-helm until then?"

"Don't see why not," Selkirk nodded, then leaned over to touch the internal button. "Jane, you're the symbolism expert. What's a Crom?"

"Good luck!" she said, with emphasis. "What d'you take me for? One word! You expect me to analyse that?"

## Two

NEVERTHELESS they all had several tries at guessing what it might mean during the hour of flight which brought them within direct sight of Earth. The mechanical voice came in, still with that jarring crackle, demanding to speak to Dennis Selkirk, Crom, or Olga Sverdlov, Crom.

"It's a title of some kind," Jane muttered as Selkirk identified himself and listened intently to the string of instructions which followed. Harker watched him, understanding from his expression that this part, at least, was normal and straightforward. And it was. Radio-beams took charge of the helm and the guidance system, and the crew had nothing to do but groan under the squeeze and thrust of jets as *Space-Farer* came home, spouted a thin spike of white-fire from her tail then sat on it and squashed it out into ringing silence on the bare and somehow neglected-looking concrete of the landing area.

"Four more of us," Selkirk noted. "See them, Garry, over the far corner of the field as we came down?"

"Yes. To me they looked mothballed. Obsolete by this time, I expect."

"That's possible, but by the look of the field it could be that space-flight itself is obsolete. That, or they've found some new way to do it."

"Attention, *Space-Farer Fourth!*" This voice that now rattled from their speaker was human and authoritative. "You will operate the circuits which open your hatches. You will then, severally, proceed to your cabins and await the escort that will accompany you from the ship to the interrogation centre." The rattle went away again, decisively. Harker exchanged glances with Selkirk and shrugged. Yoshi murmured, over the internal circuit,

"It sounds like quarantine, as if some of the other ships have had a bad time. We cannot argue, really."

"Perhaps not, but it wouldn't hurt them to explain. Ah well, cabins it is. At least, we're home, and they do still speak English. Let's be grateful for that!" Harker levered up out of his seat, feeling strangely deflated, and went away to his cabin. The six of them had privacy in chambers like cake-segments arranged round the centre passage-tunnel, but it had been a long time now since they had shut the doors on each other. Harker, sat on his bed, saw Jane sitting on hers and grinned at her.

"Happy homecoming!"

"I don't like it, Garry. Did you hear the military music in the background, just now?"

"Eh? No. Wait, yes I did, now you mention it. Military music?"

"No mistaking it, is there? We don't seem to have progressed much."

Harker, about to utter something reassuring, heard the sudden tramp of booted feet and changed his mind. Getting up he moved to the door and stood, to see a plumed helmet appear in the tunnel-slot, and then a stern but handsome face, a gold-braided tunic-collar, broad shoulders, a dandified uniform of luminous green crusted with gilt ornamentation, and then the jackboots which had made the noise. The man stepped out, paced aside and stamped to attention to allow the next man room to get clear. And then two more, all in the same gaudy uniform. Woodenly, they stood and waited for one more, this time in black, with a pristine white plume and jewels stitched into the gold in several places. Harker felt something barbaric, yet impressively efficient about this display. The officer, for such he obviously was, stood and turned slowly, scanning the six goggling faces with a chill blue stare. He made one complete circuit with no change on his stern face, then, with no hesitation at all, he swung to face Selkirk's door.

"Dennis Selkirk, Crom," he said, then spun again precisely. "Olga Sverdlov, Crom. You will come with me, please." He gestured to the tunnel-slot. The two selected

ones passed a rueful glance around their shipmates, shrugged, and vanished from sight down the passageway. The officer followed, then the flamboyant four, as stiff and efficient as if they had been soldier-dolls. Jane leaned out to stare at Yoshi. "You did say robots, didn't you?"

"Extremely lifelike, you must admit."

"Oh, you'd find a good word for Beelzebub himself. They—hush, here we go again. Our turn?"

This time the tramp of feet resolved itself into a trooper in another, darker shade of green, in a plain helmet with three glowing chevrons painted on it, and only the thinnest of gold piping along his seams. Following him came six men all in the same darker green and with no gold at all, but every one of them in jackboots. And every one of them, Harker noted, was a magnificently poised and built man, radiating vigorous health the way a stove radiates heat. He had no time for more as the sergeant cleared his throat and said,

"All right, you Nandys. Out!"

"Nandys?" Harker echoed, feeling the first stirrings of anger, and a touch of fear. He had no idea what the word meant, but the tone made it plainly an epithet. The sergeant swung on him tigerishly.

"You heard me! Out!"

His bark, and the almost imperceptible ripple of tension among the guard, that stiffening in readiness, was enough to charge the air with menace. Harker swallowed his rage, nodded to Jane and the others and went to the slot, stepped down into it. He heard the rest following, sensing that they were as hurt and confused as he was. Down to the exit hatch, down the ramp, down on to Earth's solid ground again, with sunlight dazzling his eyes and a breeze whipping his face. A moment to look forward to, but now he was so thoroughly baffled as to neglect it entirely. What kind of a homecoming was this? As he went forward a step or two and hesitated, the others joining him, six more massive troopers marched forward to add to the original six. Drill-neat, they formed a wall of men around the

prisoners—and Harker knew, intuitively, that that was what they were—then the sergeant snapped out,

"March!"

Unwillingly but resignedly they marched, and, as they moved, the strains of fife and drum and other things not so recognisable broke into rhythm to help them. The incongruity of it made Harker want to laugh, but the handsome faces all about him were deadly serious. Roman, he thought, as the elusive adjective came to mind. Magnificent but without the saving grace of humour. The space-port buildings had changed considerably. Over a century, he reminded himself. What did you expect? Certainly not a fantastic and glittering glasshouse of rainbow hues, as this was. Even the immense double-doors at the top of three marble steps were glass, leading into a huge cathedral-like chamber. Harker used his eyes and was dazzled. There was colour everywhere, and not just in the glow-panels on the walls. There were gorgeously elaborate uniforms on all sides, most of them considerably more gaudy than that of the officer who had taken Dennis and Olga away.

And the civilians! Harker missed a step and blundered into Yoshi as he stared at one young woman who strode by in a brief tabard-style garment of which the colour changed as she moved, the tints running and merging into one another like oil on rippling water.

"And over there," Yoshi murmured, "another just like it, but male! We have sex equality in dress, at least."

"Eugenics," Gerda whispered, from behind. "They are all such beautiful people. So fine!"

The guard halted before a blue-glass door, for the sergeant to step up and palm a glow-plate to make the door open. Then he gestured with a thumb.

"In there, and wait till you're told what to do."

The room was bare of anything resembling furnishings apart from a narrow bench built into each side-wall. Directly opposite was another door, which slid open as soon as the outer door was shut.

"Attention, Nandys. I will see you in this order. Harker

Hideki. Fromm. McLean. When I call you. All right, Harker."

The voice was briskly neutral. The man seated at the desk was comparatively sedate in a cream drape of stuff like cashmere that was swept round him in the style of a toga. The word "Roman" came again to Harker's mind as he saw, and then met the disdainful blue stare. This man had the same chiselled features and sculptured poise that seemed to be standard here. He lifted a guide-card from his desk, glanced at it.

"You will answer the following questions, yes or no. Did your ship make planet-fall anywhere?"

"Certainly not." Harker gathered his voice into order. "We had strict instructions to the contrary."

"The answer is 'no'. Did you encounter any positive signs of similar-to-human intelligence?"

"No. We found some evidence of vegetable..."

"The answer is 'no'. Did any of you experience any sickness due to radiation, ionization or any other exotic effects of being in space?"

"No." Harker got the message.

"Have you coded your personal findings and data into the memory-store?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything of importance known to you that has not been entered into the ship's data system?"

"Nothing important, no."

"The answer is 'no'." The man put down the card, touched a button, eyed Harker coldly. "Through there," he aimed an index finger at a door. "You will be escorted to medical and decontamination section. You will then be shown to your quarters. Later you will be fully questioned under poly-scop. Out!"

Harker could hardly grasp it. This man's assumption of authority was so impersonal yet so compelling that he had moved three steps towards the indicated door before a boil of unanswered questions made him halt—and turn—and meet high-browed disdain and rebuke from that classically

sculptured face. Harker gulped, suspended the questions, turned and passed through the door. By the wall outside stood a man in a dun-grey smock that was no more than cloth with appropriate holes for head and arms, falling to mid-thigh. His feet were bare, his hair cropped short and his face cow-like dull.

"Are you to take me to medical and decontamination?" Harker asked.

"Yuh!" the man grunted and turning away began to trudge with a stolid flat-footed step. The contrast was shocking, like meeting a spavined carthorse among gazelles. Harker could feel the futility of asking anything from this numbskull, even without evidence of his eyes. Then it occurred to him to be surprised that he had felt no such mental contact with any of the others he had encountered so far. Within a hundred paces his shambling guide halted by a door in pearly translucency, with the legend in glowing letters "M & D".

"In dere," he mumbled. "Take clothes off. Pay 'tention."

Harker found himself immediately in a quandary. The room was box-small and with no more furniture than the first one he had seen. There was a door opposite, and what looked like a cupboard in the left-hand wall. He stepped back smartly and caught his dull-eyed guide in the process of turning away.

"What do I do with my clothing?"

"In dere. In duh box! Don't keep 'em waiting!"

"All right. Thank you." Harker watched the man turn away again with not the slightest glimmer of understanding on his face, spent a moment marvelling at the stark contrast between the superior types and that moron, then got out of his clothes swiftly. He hesitated another pregnant moment over the small volume of Montaigne that had travelled with him, in his hip pocket, so many billions of miles, then shrugged resignedly and put it with the rest of his stuff, in the metal-walled cupboard. He hoped the sterilising process would be gentle with it. A small bell rang, a

red lamp winked on over the far door, and a bored voice told him to "Walk forward until told to stop".

This part hadn't changed much. Ceramic and chrome, the tickle of supersonics, the breathcatching flood of antibiotic aerosols and the repeated flashing of ultra-violet to pluck his eyes unpleasantly out of focus with each repetition. But then there was the foaming detergent, the needling cold spray, the tornado of warm air to dry him, and he was through. And into a cubicle the twin of the one he had started from. A wall-cupboard. And all it held was a handful of dun-grey stuff, a smock like the moron had worn.

"Is this all the clothing I get?" Harker asked the empty air, feeling the first stirrings of irrational fear.

"That is Nandy dress. Put it on. March!"

He scrambled into the thing. It was, indeed, just a long strip about a foot wide, with a hole for his head, and hook-and-loop fastenings either side at about waist level.

"You will be shown to your quarters," the bored voice told him as soon as he had secured the last hook. "You will remain there until sent for."

The total indifference added to his fear, made his stomach churn. He had the sense of being in the impersonal grasp of a monstrous machine. It helped not at all to find another moron waiting dumbly outside the far door. This was an older man, wrinkled and white haired, but with the same dully glazed expression. Without a word he revolved and went trudging away, leaving Harker to follow. After fifteen minutes of corridor the route began to plunge in zig-zag turns down to a colder level, and more corridors, but now with regular intersections at right angles. Harker managed to make out the general plan, which was of blocks with two doors to a side, each block with a letter and number combination to identify it. His guide found row H and trudged along it until they reached block 20. After a dull stare at the number he said.

"H-20. This is it. You stay here." He started to turn away then came back with effort showing on his lumpy face. "Toilets and showers, that way," he gestured in the direc-

tion of ascending numbers. "Kitchen that way, too. You hear whistle. Three times. Go and eat."

"Thank you," Harker was suddenly grateful, and moved. He "knew", with inner certainty, just what that effort had been, just how much goodwill had struggled to break through the ever-present fog in that mind. Then, left alone once more, he moved gingerly to a door, pushed it, peered in and then entered. It was a box, plain and simple, lined throughout in featureless grey plastic stuff. The ceiling glowed. At the far end of the box was a bed that was no more than a level surface with a plastic covered mattress on it and a thin open-weave blanket over it. He tested it with a palm, and sat, and tried to sort out his impressions. It was at that moment that he first realised how utterly alone he was. Of the five other people who had been as close to him as brothers and sisters for so long, he knew nothing at all. And there was no one else. That fact came in on him like a dreadful weight. No one! And he had nothing. Utterly bewildered, unable to make any kind of sense out of his predicament, he became aware that there were others quite close. That they were people like the dull-eyed clod who had left him here. And it came back again, that curious inability to sense those others, the superior ones. Had humanity discovered some strange new mental discipline that put the skilled ones so far above ordinary people as to be out of their range altogether?

Harker pulled that horrible thought out to the front of his mind and tried not to shiver. In imagination he stacked himself against the super-looking people and knew he didn't compare. So that made him one of the others, the equivalent of a dull-wit. A Nandy! The thought stirred him into restless unease, so much so that he came up off the inadequate bed, out of the box-like room, and, following that mental impression, around a corner and into the room where "they" were.

A couple of dull-wits. He saw that in the same moment that he saw how young they were, and what they were doing, huddled together on the bed. He began to back out

but the man squirmed round and sat, and frowned at him.

"You must not come in here."

"I'm sorry, I didn't know . . ."

"No more than two. It is the rule." The young man pointed to a spot on the wall, previously invisible, now glowing redly. "Unless you go soon there will be an alarm."

Harker stared at the red spot, saw it growing steadily more intense. He backed away, stood outside the door, but where he could still see, and that red tell-tale started to fade. "You mean, there's an alarm if more than two people are in one room at a time?"

"It is the rule."

"Oh. I didn't know." Harker thought hard. This, he thought, was a very simple but effective way to defeat any attempt at conspiracy. "I want to talk to you. Please. Will you come out here?"

They both came out to him. She was not unattractive, could have been lovely with grooming and posture, and some internal fire, but never while her eyes were as dull as now.

"You are new here." She made it a statement, without comment.

"That's right. Just returned to Earth, on *Space-Farer Four*. Do you happen to know, by any chance, what happened to the other star ships?"

The man surprised him. "Oh yes. *Three*, and *Six*, and *Eight*, and *Nine*, they came back. Now *Four*. All empty. There is no intelligent life anywhere, only on Earth." He spoke slowly, like someone reciting a lesson with great care.

"How do you know that?"

"It has been proved. The Crons have proved it."

"The Crons?" Harker gasped. "What are Crons?"

"They are the true people, of course."

The answer was not entirely unexpected, but it scared Harker down to his bones. His next question had to come, even though he knew the answer before it was given him.

"True people? Then what are you?"

"We are Nandys. I am Raoul Merse. This is Jennifer Hale. We are Nandys. Like you."

Harker opened and shut his mouth as soundless as a fish. The words just would not come out. It was their stolid acceptance, as much as anything, that disorganized him. Then a familiar voice spoke his name, and he cried out with the shock of it, spun round to see Yoshi Hideki at his elbow.

"Yoshi!" He croaked the word, then saw the shapeless garment that his shipmate wore. "You too?"

"And Gerda. I waited," Yoshi explained. "They were quick with me in decontamination so I thought it was worth it."

"I am glad you did," Gerda said heavily. "Here, all by myself, I would have been terrified." She made Harker feel slightly ashamed of his lack of consideration. Not until he had reached his "room" had he even thought of his companions of the past three years. To regain a little self-respect he said,

"We should wait for Jane, then. She will be sent here too. And we can't go inside anywhere, not here. It's some kind of rule that the spaces hold no more than two at a time. An automatic alarm device."

"Can you make sense out of any of this, Garry?"

"I think I can, a little, Gerda. This much is plain, at least. There are two distinct populations, the Crons and the Nandys, and we've been selected for the losing side."

"But Selkirk and Olga Sverdlov were addressed as Crons," Yoshi reminded him, "and even if there are two camps, how could it have been known, beforehand, which was which? Just what is the difference?"

"I don't know." Harker glanced over his shoulder to see Raoul Merse in the doorway staring at them, and he inclined his head. "This chap ought to be able to explain."

"It is simple," Merse opened his eyes a trifle wider at their question. "It is in the blood, in the breeding. Crons are human, are the true people."

"Then what are we?" Gerda demanded, and put into

words what the others thought but didn't dare say. "Are we supposed to be sub-human?"

Merse winced faintly. "We do not say that. We are inferior. It is our place to serve . . ."

Harker's anger surged to his tongue but Yoshi's elbow came gently into his ribs to check him and he turned, to see Jane McLean staggering along the corridor towards them. Like them, she was barefoot and in a dun-coloured robe, but the expression on her face was that of stunned despair. As the three went anxiously towards her a coldly imperious voice sounded out of the empty air, by some technical track so placed that it seemed to speak into each ear at once.

"Nandy Harker to interrogation. Proceed towards lower numbers and the beginning of the alphabet. Nandy Harker, acknowledge."

"What . . .?" Harker stared at his companions in consternation, then ducked his head instinctively as a thin blast of sound hurt his ear-drums like a pin-prick. It hurt the others too. He spoke out.

"I am Harker. I hear you."

"Proceed at once to interrogation, as instructed."

The calm assumption of authority in that voice was maddening, but it had teeth. He shrugged at his friends.

"I'd better go. No knowing what goad they will use next. You'll be in this block?"

### THREE

HE went away, following the indications on the corners. A chill thought came to mind. Slavery has always posed a problem of its own, in that a stupid slave is not very useful, and an intelligent one is dangerous. If Nandys were the slaves they appeared to be, this culture seemed to have solved the problem in efficient fashion. Of course there had to be a mistake somewhere. Harker was not particularly a conceited man, but he reasoned that any group capable of taking a spaceship to the stars and back could hardly be

classified as sub-human morons. Administrative error somewhere. He was still clinging to that as he made his way through yet another glass door and into a bright sterile room, to be met by a man in surgical white, masked, but with the arrogant poise that said he was no Nandy. And holding a small device something like a pistol, but with a needle tip. He pointed with the other hand to a chair, a seat equipped with trailing wires and clamps of various kinds. Harker sat, cringed a little as the needle-tip was aimed at his throat, felt a tingle, then a rush of darkness. A voice told him,

"You will answer all my questions truthfully to the best of your ability."

He remembered nothing of any questions. He came back to light and life with an acid taste in his mouth and the many aches of a long period of sitting still in one posture. Mask-face had put away the anaesthetic weapon.

"Now that you are conscious again," he said, "you will answer this, a point that was unclear under the drug. You spoke of an impression of being contacted by an intelligence while in the vicinity of a certain star." He had the catalogue number and relevant quotes from the ship's log. Harker nodded.

"It was just an impression, nothing positive, and I can't explain."

"Only yourself?"

"No. McLean, Fromm and Hideki sensed something similar too. But not Selkirk or Sverdlov."

The interrogator mused over this a moment, asked a question or two more in a futile attempt to elicit a description of what had been nothing more than a mental "feel", and then stood back. Harker chanced a question of his own.

"What do you make of it?"

"A curious phenomenon. Similar incidents have been reported and checked a few times, but only among Nandys. Informed opinion, plus the logical derivation from our machines indicates that it is a compensatory delusion fos-

tered by the Nandy state. Confronted by the fact that you are inferior, you naturally try to manufacture something exclusively your own."

"Inferior?" Harker echoed the word angrily, chancing the wrath of the masked man. But there was no wrath. The interrogator, slipping his mask away and swinging it from a finger by the loops, wore the smile of the superior who wants, even cares, to achieve understanding.

"Of course inferior. Listen to me. In your times, before the truth was discovered, you had much misunderstanding and bad feeling between various people for no apparent reason. It is characteristic of those times. I have studied the records of the period with great interest. Lack of ability to understand. Am I right?"

"Of course!" Harker admitted. "But there were reasons. Different cultures, different languages, different aims, suspicion, power domination, all sorts of reasons. There was no question of one person being superior or inferior to any other. At least," he corrected, "there was endowment, of course. Intelligence factors and social opportunities . . ."

"You are confused," the interrogator said kindly. "I will simplify it for you. Like this. Six of you closely together on a ship, yes? You got on well together because you had been selected for that. But it is true, is it not, that two of your number were dominant, were most competent to take charge, to decide, to get things done, whereas the rest of you spent much time in long arguments and discussions, unimportant matters. Yes?"

Harker sagged into the chair. There was something frighteningly wrong about this, simply because it was so right. In a few words this man had drawn a picture of three years. On competence, ability to perform, dominance—it was true that Selkirk and Olga Sverdlov had been superior. If that was the only yardstick. The others had been intellectual, academic, and on that basis, inferior. His face betrayed him. The Crom smiled, not unkindly.

"You thought, possibly, that a mistake had been made? Yes, some of the others thought so too. Not so. Be assured,

there is no mistake. You are a Nandy, an inferior human breed. It is nothing to be emotional about, but to be accepted. You will be taken care of. In a little while there will be chemotherapy to take away the unfair burdens on your mind, and then you will be quite safe, unworried and happy. Go back to your quarters."

"I don't understand. What am I?"

"Naturally it is a shock at first, but it will be taken care of. You must try to think of yourself as a domestic animal. That's best. You will be cared for. The work is not hard. Go now."

Harker went, his bodily co-ordination carrying him without benefit of his mind, which was in chaos. He had blurred impressions of Yoshi taking his arm, urging him to lie down, and then utter exhaustion knocked him out. He woke from dreams which he knew were nightmares but which fled as he opened his eyes. Someone was sounding a raucous hooter somewhere. Yoshi stood by him, calm but hard-eyed.

"Now it is feeding-time," the little Japanese muttered. "Come along, my friend, it is unwise to keep the masters waiting."

Harker stood. He did indeed feel ravenous. He had no idea how much time had passed. But he did, now, think of the others.

"What about Jane, and Gerda?"

"We will find them, presumably, where we eat." Yoshi took his arm to urge him along. "Jane had a very bad time. You know how difficult it always was for her to compose her thoughts into entry-note phrases. There was a lot of information she had held back, in her mind, until she could get it straight. Expecting, as we all did, to be questioned at length."

"What did they do to her?"

"So far as I can tell, they stripped her mind, layer by layer, and dug the information out. With various drugs and, I suspect, electronic methods too. And, of course, to do that they had to break down her personal resistance. You'll see."

Harker saw the featureless corridors go by like so much knotted nightmare. He had never before heard that note of chill ferocity in Yoshi's voice, nor felt such a seething wave of emotion from this most self-controlled of men. Now, as they turned yet another corner, there was the growing noise of many people, bare feet thudding on the floor, the mutter of subdued talk, and ahead a wide door stood open to give a view of a barn-like room with many white-topped tables in regular rows. To the right, just inside the door, was a gently milling crowd around the slotted face of a dispenser.

"I was told that we are an inferior form," Harker whispered, as they waited to take their turn. "Croms and Nandys. They are the real people, the Croms, and we are a kind of domestic animal, are Nandys. What the devil does it all mean, Yoshi?"

"I do not know. I have discovered the same story. According to my informants it has always been so. At a guess, that must be at least for three generations, more than fifty years. There they are!" Harker caught his nod and saw Gerda and Jane at a table some distance away, but there was no time to do more than nod, for they had reached the serving slots. There on a chrome counter were numbers of slabs of stuff like pale granulated chocolate, each slab sectioned into four pieces. And an endless chain of plastic beakers full of translucent liquid with a greenish tinge. No choice was offered. They took, moved on, circled round to move towards the table occupied by their friends. The tables were for six, Harker saw, and, as he drew near, he also saw that the two women were side by side, with a nimble oldster dexterously fending off anyone who looked like settling at that table. Suspecting some kind of protocol, Harker hesitated, but the old man saw him and jerked an impatient hand to urge him on.

"Come on," he muttered, barely moving his lips. "We only have half-an-hour, and there's a lot to explain."

Harker sat, with Yoshi by his side, opposite Jane. He felt sick as he saw the dim peering look in her eyes and the

foolish limpness of her face. He looked a question at Gerda, and saw her repressed tears, but before he could ask, the old man leaned across from his seat at the end.

"Pay attention. You'll have questions, I know, but let me talk first. Eat while you listen, but go easy on that stuff. It's nourishment, sure, but it is also full of forget-drugs." Harker looked at the grainy stuff in dismay. He was really hungry now. "It's all right for a while. Accumulative. Couple of meals won't hurt. Now, you're the crew just back from Space, right? Not been mind-scrubbed yet, but you will be if they have their way. I'm here to stop that. Name's Adam Knight, and you have to trust me."

Harker eyed him askance. Knight's leathery old face had the same stunned look as all the rest, and his eyelids were lowered so that it was difficult to see his eyes. He sat half-turned, apparently staring at nothing, and made pretence to eat. There was nothing to distinguish him except that tingling wave of mental alertness from him that was as positive as a cool breeze.

"We're listening, at least. Are you going to explain to us just what it's all about, this Nandys and Croms, and all that?"

"Not here. That's a long story. Got to get you out first. That's my job. Won't be able to talk to you again, so listen closely. Next thing that happens to you is allocation to work stations. You have a choice."

"A choice?" Yoshi exclaimed. "We can pick our own work?"

"Not that kind of choice, no. There's an administrator here. You Space people are a cut above the herd, valuable stock, and he has the disposal."

"You mean he will sell us to the highest bidder?" Gerda demanded.

"Right. Or to somebody in a position to do him a favour back. The Croms are ferociously competitive. Part of their code. Animals who have been to the stars have prestige value, if nothing else."

"So how do we have a choice?" Harker asked.

"Because the Crons have ethics, too. They believe in machines. The administrator will try to talk you into going where he wants you to, by telling you what a soft life you'll have. It's true, too. You'll be pampered. But you have the right to be allocated by machine, if you want. By a computer that analyses your useful capabilities, and then matches you with standing demands. There's always a waiting list."

"For manual work?" Yoshi sounded incredulous. "Surely that has been eliminated by now?"

"That was the theory, in your day, wasn't it?" For just a moment the old man permitted a grin to stir his features, making him look like a goblin. "Economics said otherwise. It doesn't take much brains to be a servant, to dust and tidy, fetch and carry, tend a garden, answer the door—or even work in the fields picking and planting. A stupid can do that. But it takes a very smart and expensive machine to do it, and smart people to keep it running. And a whole lot of smart machines, all different, to do all those things. And the skill, and time, and training, and keep, of ten men just to keep one machine in action. But you take one stupid human, feed him, tell him what to do, and there you are. People are cheaper. Slaves are cheaper still. But there's a waiting list for the good ones. And an unbiased machine to decide who goes to where. So you are entitled to ask for the machine decision. Once you do that the administrator can't argue, and he won't."

"But what do we gain?" Harker asked, and the old man grinned again.

"I can fix the machine," he said. "You leave that part to me. What you have to do is give the right answers. The machine will ask you, and it has a circuit to detect emotional avoidance, so don't try any lies on it. All you say is that you have no mechanical aptitudes, no skills, but that you are willing to obey, to learn, and not afraid to work. All of which is true, isn't it?"

The helpless three exchanged glances. Gerda put it into

words, as she always did when there was something difficult to say.

"He is one of us. You know he is. We must believe him."

"All right," Yoshi sighed. "But what about Jane? How shall we coach her into anything?" The old man leaned out and across to take a quick look. "It was the debriefing." Yoshi explained. "She always did have difficulty expressing her thoughts, or writing them down. So they used some kind of drug to get at her memories. Now look at her."

"Temporary lobotomy," Knight nodded, then resumed his dim-wit pose. "In the normal course of events it would dissipate in about forty-eight hours. But by that time she'd have ingested six doses of forget-it, and the light would be out permanently. Puromycin-six is the usual stuff, a short-cut way to block the personality-factor involved in remembering anything. And this food-block they supply has azaguanine in it. Same thing, only it takes longer. Good job I came prepared. Here." He fumbled with the slit side of his dingy garment and then stretched his hand seemingly aimlessly out on the table. Harker saw a slim strip of some translucent plastic stuff, with lumps. Tablets!

"Give her two. The rest of you take one each. It's only yeast R.N.A., but it will pull you back, for the moment. Now eat up and don't forget what I told you."

"Are we being monitored?" Yoshi demanded.

"Right. One camera on a roving scan. No sound though. The Crons go a lot on behaviour. It's easier to analyse. You noticed the group watcher in your quarters? Simple and effective. They don't mind pairs, that keeps everybody happy, but the detector screams if there are three people in any one room for more than five minutes. Same like now. If we just mumble at each other in short snatches, that's fine. But if the camera spots any long conversations we'll be in trouble. Me mostly. I can't stand a mental probe, not with what I know." He took his time munching on a piece of food-stuff and washing it down with the fluid that tasted faintly of lime juice and honey.

"Who are you, anyway?" Gerda mumbled, and the old man grinned again.

"Lots of things, I am. Officially, a gardener, but I'm rated trustworthy for messenger-service. That's how I got here today. If it works out, I'll go back tomorrow, with you four."

"Back where?"

"If I told you that, you'd know enough to cause a lot of trouble, but I can tell you that I'm part of the Nandy underground movement, and I don't care if you go and tell the administrator that much, because I know he won't believe you. That's one of those harmless myths, like Nandys being able to sense each other without words."

"You know about that?" Harker asked.

"Know? Man, you four are broadcasting ten times as powerfully as any I've come across so far. Something else we'll have to talk about another time. Meal-stand will be over in a minute, and I have to get away ahead of the mob. Just one thing to remember always, if you run into argument with Croms. They worship logic. See you!" He rose and shambled off leaving them to wonder.

#### FOUR

As predicted, the impersonal voice called for Harker to proceed at once to Personnel Selection, almost as soon as he had regained the cell he shared with Yoshi. This time it was more like what he remembered as an office, with a clear-topped desk and a control-panel on rollers handily by. The man at the desk was older than any Harker had so far seen, but by no means senile. The grooves of age and experience gave his patrician face a stern severity, but it had an acute mind behind it, that face.

"Sit there, Nandy Harker," he said, and Harker sat. Power, confidence and efficiency poured from this man, so much so that Harker was torn in doubt. Compared mentally with those creatures he had just seen, or even with himself in objective truth—compared with the thousands of his con-

temporaries on an Earth so remote and long ago that it seemed no more than a dream—compared thus, it was hard for Harker to fight the insinuation that he really was inferior. He had known men like this before, rare ones, men with "presence" and the gift for filling the space where they stood. In something over a century, perhaps mankind had found a way to produce such people to order. Eugenics, as Gerda had said and idealists had wanted, even that long ago. Breed better people, cut out the inferior stock. A brave plan. But what if you happened to be one of the inferior? The stern old man spoke slowly, with care.

"Your future will be decided here, Harker. I have had previous experience with Nandys from your time-period, and I understand some of the problems that bother you now. In your time it was taken for granted that everyone had a right to facts and reasons, without discrimination. We know better now. To stuff a mind with facts, data and reasoning that it cannot digest is simply to deform it. If I were such a fool as to insert a second order semantic problem into a series three digital analyser, it would grind to a halt. Being a machine, it is equipped with safety overloads. But for them it would fuse into ruin. You are not so equipped. Therefore, to be kind as well as efficient, the logical thing to do is to refrain from overloading your mind with concepts it cannot handle. See that?"

"Yes." Harker found his voice, ventured a comment. "But how do you know what my mind can handle?"

The administrator made a very tiny shrug. "You were extensively examined before you originally departed on your mission into space. That examination has been duplicated since, just to make sure. Cellular analysis indicates and confirms that you are Nandy. Nandys are incapable of understanding and appreciating logical reasoning. Therefore you will not understand or accept what I have just said. Do you see now how useless it is?"

"That's either a circular argument, or a paradox."

"It is neither. It is a simple factual statement. Let it suffice to convince you that you will get no explanations,

no reasonings, nothing that you can't handle. We have methods, painless, unobtrusive and beneficial methods, for deleting any and all such bothersome problems from your mind. We want you to be happy and content. Now, let's move to the question of your employment. It is within my power to allocate you to a very good home, the establishment of a high-ranking personage, where you will be very well cared for and have the minimum of duties. I have the power to do this in view of your unusual circumstances. Do you understand?"

Harker did. Old Adam had been right. But this man was supposed to offer some alternative, surely? "Don't I have any say in the matter?"

"Of course. But to what end, when it concerns things beyond your ability to understand and evaluate? Don't you trust me?"

Harker saw a chance. "In logic, why should I? You say my circumstances are unusual. What's the usual thing, the logical thing?"

"The usual thing, for employment allocation or re-allocation, is to be analysed, assessed, and assigned, by computer. You spoke just now of 'say in the matter'. If you elect to put yourself in the care of the machine you'll have no say at all. Now, you don't want that, do you?" The administrator put a little wheedle into his tone. "You're sturdy, Harker. You'd be useful in mining or cattle-tending, street-cleaning, latrine duties, that kind of thing. Unless you've some kind of artistic or entertainment skills, and you haven't. According to your records, anyway. But there's your choice, the machine—or my discretion." It was extremely well done. This was a man accustomed to getting his way by skilled use of emphasis and a flexible voice. A dominant. And all Harker had against that was the hurried word of an old man—and that odd sensory gift that was no more than "a Nandy myth". Only, it wasn't.

"I'll take the machine," he said. "Just to be logical."

"Logical?" the administrator sounded disgusted. "A Nandy, logical? Very well, turn and face the console,

answer the questions, yes, or no. Put your hands here."

"This is the machine?" Harker stared at the small thing, not much bigger than a typewriter of his own time, and felt clamps, gentle but firm, close on his fingers.

"That is merely the sensor. The machine itself has over five billion logic units. It contains the life-records and dispositions of every person on Earth. You should have chosen me, Harker. Pay attention now."

It was a test of nerve and faith. Harker answered the questions, mostly in the negative, and wondered whether he had been foolish to believe that one goblin-like old man could, in secret, "fix" a machine like this. But it was done now, and done very quickly too. He had to wait only a moment or two before an inscribed slip was delivered to the administrator's desk, and the severe face scowled at it.

"Margent again! That man has a positive genius for matching space-scum patterns. I might have known."

"Who's Margent?"

"Director-General of New Mexico Area Board. You'll be out in the backwoods, Harker. Go now. You will be informed when transport is ready."

"May I ask just one more question?"

"Be brief."

"You said 'space-scum', just now, by which I infer something unpopular about space travel. Or just the people who go?"

"We have viable colonies on Luna, Venus, Mars and some of the satellites of Jupiter and Saturn. Interplanetary travel is established routine, but it is infernally expensive and yields virtually nothing. We decided long ago to be sane, and devote our powers and resources to making this earth of ours the living space it ought to be, that it should have become as long ago as your time, Harker."

"That's true. There were people then who said we'd do better to put things right on Earth first, and leave the stars for later."

"Of course. You can quote logic, and the people of your time could also quote it, could even understand it, dimly.

But we have put it into effect. Space-travel is escapism, nothing more. We have stopped all that nonsense."

Harker passed Yoshi Hideki as he walked back to his room. He had time only for a brief word of reassurance for his friend. His mind was far too busy arranging the facts as he had them, trying to get an overall pattern of this society from what little he had seen of it. Nothing very clear emerged except a sense of astonishment that one dominant group of people could have landed so positively in the driving seat. There were clues and hints to lead him to believe that this state of affairs was world-wide. After all, when they had seen Earth vanishing on their rear view-screens, back in eighty-four, the "one world" concept was virtually a reality, with only token governments preserving the polite fiction that any one country could do anything on its own. And an enfranchised citizenry, the first small step towards democracy, had been the common aim. So how the devil had it all slipped into this tyranny of the elite?

"We guessed it all wrong," he said to Gerda as she joined him in his ponderings. Jane was sleeping in the next room-space, and he knew that without having to enquire. This mind-sharing faculty was sharpening with use. As, for instance, Gerda knew what he was referring to, and shook her head.

"I didn't, Gareth. Remember you said it would be impossible to predict the progress of science? You meant scientific discovery, of course. But Jane and I had computed the expansion of science as a way of thinking, as a doctrine, as a substitute for religion. The average person has always wanted guidance, an authority, a leader, someone to lean on, to run to for help, for certainty. Religions have always tried to provide certainty by faith and belief. Science does better. It provides concrete demonstrations. Its apostles can say 'This is true; this works; we can show you!' and they do. It was on the cards that science, as a thing in itself, would usurp the religious function."

"But how the devil could the scientific attitude of mind degenerate into a travesty like this? Gerda, we are not in-

ferior, you know that. What am I? A chemist with medical training, some biology and a leaning for philosophy. No genius, certainly. Yet, with just a hint from old Knight, I was able to make a fool of that administrator. His mind is as closed as an endless tunnel!"

"You think science is democratic?" She came and sat by him, and for a moment they were as close as they had so often been on *Space-Farer IV*.

"Not democratic, no. But it's not absolute, either. What's that old epigram? 'The only final answer we're ever likely to reach is that there is no final answer!' But this whole business has the dead smell of finality, of the end of the line. Nandys cannot understand logic. There is no intelligent life on other planets. And so on. That's bigotry, not science!"

"Bigotry is from the mind," Yoshi said, from the doorway. "If you have that kind of mind, you can use anything towards that end."

"You had trouble?" Harker sensed it. Yoshi grinned ruefully.

"Just a little. It was most difficult to pull the conversation round to a machine choice. We had an argument. I told him I had worked all my life with logical machines and logical disciplines, and he went to considerable trouble to try to prove to me that as a Nandy I could not possibly understand logic."

"It's crazy," Harker groaned. "How the devil can they be so wrong, with all their emphasis on reasoning and logic?"

"Like science," Yoshi chuckled, "logic is only as good as its postulates and assumptions. I wonder who Margent is?"

"I have a strange thought," Gerda stood suddenly. "Dennis and Olga, they were the practical ones. Are Crons now. The superior class. Perhaps they are pulling strings to help us!"

"I suppose it is barely possible," Harker muttered. "I gather that the mysterious Margent has managed to collar all the other space-farers too, and one must presume they had mixed crews, like us. Nandys and Crons!"

"Ugly words!" Gerda shivered, tugged uselessly at her dingy garment, then turned to the door. "I'll go and keep an eye on Jane. She's better, but not right yet. The devils!"

She had hardly turned the corner when there came the startlingly novel sound of booted feet, a steady tramp and rapidly nearing. Then a trooper, all six feet three and poised like an athlete, resplendent in darkly luminous green tunic and gilded helmet, halted outside the door. He consulted a card.

"Harker. Nandy. Hideki. Nandy. Outside! Stand there!"

As they went and stood they saw old Adam Knight just three paces away, close to the wall, standing as stupidly slack-jawed as a badly stuffed doll. He showed no sign of seeing them. The trooper's voice came from round the corner as he read out, "Fromm. Nandy. McLean. Nandy. Outside!" In a moment here came the two of them, Gerda tense, Jane still looking a trifle lost. Harker gave her a smile and a silent encouragement.

"Follow me," the trooper ordered. "You, Knight, bring up the rear. See they don't get lost!"

They marched at a brisk but comfortable pace. The route climbed. They came to double glass doors and saw daylight. They stood at the bottom of a tilted tube of monstrous diameter while their guard transferred them to the charge of the pilot of a thing that Harker gathered was aircraft but unlike any he had ever imagined. Its mirror-finish bulk was as featureless as a pencil and the same shape and it lay on a ramp, aimed at the sky, at an angle of about forty-five degrees. There were four more dun-garbed people just climbing the ladder into the hatchway in the ship's side. The transfer complete, the pilot gestured to his charges.

"When you're inside, just sit, one to a seat. Do nothing. You, Knight, watch them. All right?"

Without waiting for answer he stalked to a space under the nose, put up his arms, and a bar came down for him to grip, went up again with him hanging from it. Harker moved to the ramp. Knight dodged ahead, stood to one side to pass them in.

"Just hold tight," he muttered. "No time to explain just yet. Don't let the gee-forces scare you. Crons believe in being rugged!"

The warning was timely. No sooner were they all settled in the air-buoyant seats than motor noise howled, and Harker, by a port, saw slim shiny winglets extrude like blades from the hull. Knight, by his side, whispered, "We get fired out of here like a projectile, and coast down at the far end. Doesn't take long but it knocks hell out of your guts."

As he spoke Harker felt himself thrust back into the billowing embrace of his chair, and held there by a giant invisible palm, until he wanted to scream for mercy. There was noise at first, but then they left it behind. The view out there was a blur. The wing-edges began to glow redly. Then, with a thump, the thrust pressure cut right out and vertigo took its place for an awful moment or two until the pilot did something and his motor-noise changed from rumble to stuttering roar and there was thrust again. The landscape below reeled past like an impossibly fast film. Knight mumbled hurriedly,

"The other four are camouflage. Margent orders eight new serfs every month, rejects those he can't use. Helps to cover the fact that you four are going to get lost."

"This Margent sounds friendly. Is he?"

"Not all Crons have ossification of the brain. Margent is on our side, but he doesn't know anything more than he needs to. He prefers it that way. Watch for his wife, though. She can be a problem."

"What do you want us to do?" Yoshi whispered from the seat behind.

"Just obey orders. They may be rough, but it will be all right. Just leave it to me. Hold on, now. Almost there."

The motor-roar grew fierce now. The wings folded out more, grew a bright red. The aircraft shuddered as its nose dipped and it began the long stomach-churning plunge back to ground. The balloon seats spun into reverse, giddily. Squinting over to the other side now, Harker saw a great

expanse of white leap away astern and billow out to become strainingly rigid. Five minutes later they were diving headlong into another slanted tunnel, with braking clamps to smack against the hull and slow it down. Harker was soaking wet when he came to stand and walk on stringy legs.

Here, however, there was a distinct change in the atmosphere. There was a guard ready to greet them as they left the plane, but he knew Knight.

"Another batch, hey? All right, you know what to do. Get along!"

The inspection was cursory, the man obviously impatient to get away and chat with one of his own kind. Looking back, Harker saw him and the pilot disappear through a different door. Knight headed for open air and a truck, a thing like an open-sided box balanced inside two great circular sausage-wheels which flattened where they lay along the ground and billowed into half-hoops from front to rear.

"Now we can talk," Knight declared, as he threw a switch and pushed two buttons. "This thing knows its way. Let me tell you about Margent, first. He's Director-General of the New Mexico Territorial Area, but it's just position, prestige, sounds good, doesn't mean a thing. The real power is in the industrial and diplomatic fields. He knows this. It doesn't bother him, keeps his wife happy. Serfs, like us, rate for prestige. They are a burden, have to be fed, housed and kept healthy. Machines work better, but are not so versatile. And you can't brag about machines. That's how it is. So Glamar Margent is happy with dozens of serfs to brag about, and Margent, he's a farmer by inclination and as a hobby. So he appreciates people, knows that Nandys are not as dim as popularly supposed, also knows that Crons aren't as smart as they like to think. He is quite a philosopher, is Margent."

"I imagine that trait is rare among Crons," Harker suggested, and the old man grinned.

"You catch on real quick. The Crons can't see it, but

they've sold out to the machine, to machine-thinking, until they aren't much better than machines themselves. Don't get me wrong, now. The Crons are very efficient. They have everything organised down to the last iota. But when you know how, you can always fool a machine."

"You say Margent is on our side? How?"

"The colonies have labour-problems. Machinery can do most things, but Mars, Venus and the other colonies turn up problems that only a brain can handle, and only hands and eyes can work out. Crons don't like colony life. They prefer to be here, in the prestige swim. So only the dubs get sent out, with minimum maintenance, but they can have all the Nandys they care to ask for. Everybody knows this. Everybody knows that Venus, for instance, is the end of the line, a dump, a graveyard—and so on. Everybody knows."

Harker caught his breath. "You mean, we are on our way to Venus?"

"In due course. It'll take a day or two to fix. We'll work a switch in the loading up of the next ship out. The port is close by, which is why we use Margent. And he knows we are somehow contriving to get our people away to Venus, but he keeps quiet about it. Especially as we arrange to have some special roots shipped back to him every so often. His hobby, you see. And he goes along with the idea that a man, Nandy or not, has a right to run away from a situation he can't control. Being a farmer-mentality, he doesn't have the serf-complex like the rest."

"But Venus?" Gerda muttered. "Will we be any better off there?"

"I'll get to that, later. We're almost home now."

## FIVE

THEY rolled through smooth green countryside now, with stretching fields as neat as a chessboard and here and there a steadily patrolling machine to tend the burgeoning soil. Ahead loomed a magnificent building that reminded Harker of a print he had once seen of a colonial mansion. But this

was glass and chrome and colour throughout. Margent met them in a vast room that might have been open to the sky for all they could see of a roof, except that there was no breath inside of the stiff breeze they had felt outside. He was a tall and lean old man, with all the hawk-like nobility of a Capitoline senator, and a toga to add to the resemblance.

“Knight will instruct you,” he said. “There’s household work, or the gardens. You’ll be happy here as long as you care to stay. Get them into uniform, Knight, and then feed them. My wife will want to see the females.”

And that was all from him. The uniforms were no more elaborate than the garment they already wore, but were of shimmer-stuff in deep violet and blazoned front and back with an ornate “M”. Knight warned them,

“Hang on to the old gear. You’ll need that later, when we run for it.”

“There must be a full explanation,” Yoshi insisted, as they hooked the gaudy stuff into place. “We know you are benign, but this is just on the emotional level. A man may honestly wish me no harm, but be misguided.”

“You’ll get it.” Knight led them away to a lower chamber where there were others in violet, moving dull-eyed among cooking equipment. “But you’ll have to tell me one thing, first. You four have this telepathy thing off to a fine art. Where did you learn it? And you’ve sharpened me up a lot just being with you. How do you do that?”

“We don’t know,” Harker admitted, and went on to tell him of the one brief contact they had felt, out there in the star-blackness. “It seems to have acted like opening a door, or closing a synapse and making a circuit. At any rate it is developing with use, even with us. Do we agree on that?”

“Yes!” said Jane McLean, and the confident declaration out of her long silence surprised them all. “I have been listening to all of you, and myself, and reorganising my mind. Whatever the drug was, it seems to have cleaned up a lot of muddle for me. I feel bright and new inside. And it is true, what you are thinking, Mr. Knight.”

The old man stared. For the first time, Harker saw him shaken in his confidence. “You know what I’m thinking?”

“Yes. Nandy and Crom, two different breeds of human. It is true, but I think there is more, something you do not know. We shall see.”

Harker turned his attention on her and it was like drawing away a shade from a sunlit window. The warmth of her mind reached into his own, making it unfold like a flower. It was the strangest sensation. He knew, instantly, that the blazing light had dawned for Gerda and Yoshi too. And then Knight felt it. He cringed back in his chair for a moment, but then as the power unfolded in him too he seemed to grow, to shed some of his years.

“I feel a fool,” he said, “trying to tell you anything now. You don’t need me any more.”

“Oh, but we do,” Harker assured him. “We need words and concepts.”

“Well, I can give you those. Let me get my dates right. Nineteen fifty, sixty, thereabouts, they started cracking the genetic code, right? And, if I remember my lessons, they thought they were on the trail of life itself, how the instructions pass from one molecule to another. They even had thoughts about genetic engineering, or how to modify and correct mistakes in the germ-plasm. Grow creatures to order. Cure diseases. Make everybody one hundred per cent fit and healthy, right? And then, about nineteen ninety-five, Gorst and Funk discovered there were two distinct patterns in the human nucleic acid chain. As a popularisation of the period put it, ‘The same message, but in two different languages, just as you can’t tell the difference between a Russian and an American, until they start talking.’ And it went on from there.”

“But,” Gerda frowned, “it has been established for hundreds of years that all humans are the same species.”

“It has? On what basis? Infertility? Structural similarity? Blood-groups?” Knight challenged her promptly. “You ever hear of hybrids? You ever wonder why some children resemble their parents and some don’t?”

"It seems slender evidence on which to erect a theory of types," Harker objected, knowing that the next stage in the reasoning was there in Knight's mind, ready to emerge.

"Archaeology, anthropology, evolutionary theory—they all came into it. Laboratory techniques for analysing fossil remains, things like that. It began to add up. Researchers had already discovered several types of proto-man, in your time, remember? The theory had been that several evolutionary lines had tried to break through into homo sapiens but they had all failed except one. But that wouldn't stand up any longer. The evidence began to pile up. Evidence that there had been one type roaming the Earth in comparative peace and quiet, in small bands and tribes, for something like half a million years without any great change. One type, named for a French valley . . ."

"German," Gerda corrected. "Neanderthal. Hence Nandy. Is it possible?"

"You've got it. And even the simple primers used to print the story that real man started with a bang, with the other type . . ."

"Cro-Magnon," Harker filled in quietly. "That's your French valley. The Crons, eh? You know, there was a theory, even then—in our time, I mean—that Cro-Magnon didn't wipe out Neanderthal, but merely out-survived him."

"But," Jane inserted, "there never was any theory to explain just how Cro-Magnon suddenly erupted into being the way he apparently did. And I think I know. But go on, Mr. Knight."

"Well, the data came out in quantity and could be confirmed. Nandy never got anywhere, never achieved a thing, by himself. Then came Crom, and the human story took off like a rocket. That's one thing. The Crons are competent, they achieve, they get things done. They build, organise, plan and compete. They tend to be aggressive, healthy, strong, handsome, all the good things in the human calendar."

"Typical extroverts," Harker mused. "Loud, swaggering,

fond of gaudy colours and rowdy music. Extremists. Authoritative. Good heavens! Is that the real difference?"

"You've got it," Knight nodded. "Physique or skin colour doesn't have a thing to do with it. That's environmental adaptation. The difference is in mental set. And it turned out to be a simple matter to devise a cell-test to determine one from the other."

"What of the hybrids?" Yoshi demanded. "They are interfertile?"

"Oh, yes. The result of a cross is offspring who are dull and stupid, but powerful; or sickly and ailing and pervertedly brilliant; or the union is sterile altogether. Hybrids crossed, of course, could produce all sorts, and that was why stupid parents could have brilliant children, or vice versa. And why family inbreeding could and did produce extremes. I say 'could' because it doesn't happen any more. Because the Crons were, and are, the efficient and aggressive type, and they very quickly established themselves as the true humans. And there was little opposition."

"No opposition?" Yoshi cried. Jane smiled, a terrifying smile.

"Remember Glorious Greece?" she murmured. "We admire those perfect bodies, the beautiful people immortalised in stone. Even now, we admire them. Yet remember, too, their brilliant minds. Think of Plato, Socrates, Archimedes, Zeno—and remember what they were like. Gnarled and ugly men. Nandys. Think of all your philosophers and thinkers. Think!"

"It is true!" Gerda exclaimed. "Freud was an ugly man. Darwin too. Galileo, and the wonderful Einstein, a little goblin man. Two physical types, two mental types. But we admire them, why? Why do we feel inferior to the Crons? Why?"

Harker had no answer to the problem either. He had to admit to himself that he had always admired and secretly envied Dennis Selkirk, and all those others who could do things. The magnificent animals.

"It is a difficult question to answer," Yoshi said in his

thoughtful way, "unless we examine the references properly. Active and aggressive people, those who achieve things, they are to be admired because their works are visible, are tangible, are the result of thought, not the thought itself."

"And we fail to impress them," Harker, the philosopher, took it away from him in bitterness, "because there is something mysterious about ideas and concepts. The most powerful forces in the world, yet we can't explain them to ourselves, much less anyone else. Thinkers have always been distrusted, all through history."

The great chrome and glass kitchen echoed the bitterness in his heart. The entire staff stood silent, caught by the emotion, if not the sense, of the moment. Even the already established Nandy dim-wits were stricken. Only the senseless machines went on ticking and chuckling about their business. Then Jane McLean stood, all impishness gone and a strange fervour glowing through her homely exterior.

"Don't condemn them," she said. "When they were drugging me, to make me talk, I learned something. It is not that they think differently from us at all. It is that they have an overgrowth, here." She tapped her head. "It is a barrier. Evolution overreached itself in them. Look, in the animal world we know about certain patterns of behaviour which we call 'instincts', because we cannot explain them. And they are so simple to understand once you realise that all animals of one species are in touch. They share a common consciousness."

Harker could feel the doors and windows creaking and cracking open in his mind as her inspired intuition broke down the barriers in his thinking. In sudden flashes many things were clear to him.

"In us," she went on, "the development process produced self-conscious awareness, but we were always conscious of others, however dimly. We were not alone, even though our culture and our language argued otherwise. The myths and legends about mental powers persisted. Now—we know they were true all the time. But only for us. Only for

that kind of mind. Neanderthal Man lived in peace and understanding. Crom can't. Crom exploded that, ended the Golden Age for humanity, because Crom has this growth in his head. Because Crom is shut off from his kind, from others, because he is alone."

Harker saw it at once. Gerda was nodding too, and Yoshi.

"We cannot condemn them," Jane insisted, "for being what they are, each one isolated, alone, an island. Naturally they suspect everyone and everything. Naturally they strive to succeed by visible works and deeds. Naturally they need language, and rules, and laws and orders and force, and logic. Because they can never really know another, never be really sure. And you cannot condemn a blind man for not being able to see . . ."

But now Knight was on his feet too, and a totally different person from the chuckling hobgoblin he had been. Righteous anger came from him like the red glow of a furnace.

"You don't know what they've done to us. It's fine for you. All you know is what you've run into in the past two or three days. I've lived all my sixty-two years with it. And two generations of my kind before me. Dim animals, we. Serfs, pets, humanoid robots, we. They are kind, they feed us. They are kind, they don't work us too hard. They are kind, they keep us healthy. They feed us on forget-it so we won't be worried. They dose us with sex-null so we won't overbreed. And when we're too old to be useful, they kill us mercifully. And you say we mustn't condemn them?"

He choked for a moment on his rage, and the others were silent, sharing his feelings. "Why do you think I'm here?" he demanded, getting his voice back. "I could be safe and comfortable on Venus. We have a good colony going there. Real people, and peace and quiet. But I elected to come back. I work for Margent. I keep an ear to the ground. I snatch any Nandys who show signs of rising above the half-wit level, and connive them into working here. Then, at a favourable moment, I swap 'em with the next serf consignment for Venus. You remember the space-port admini-

strator told you his machine had records of every person on planet? He meant Crons, not us. We're just heads to be counted, and no one cares a damn which is who. This was to be the last batch for me. I was going to make this run with you, back to Venus. We are about ready to blow the whistle on the Crons, you know what I mean?"

They knew. It blazed in his mind. A colony militant. The revolt of the slaves. Harker sighed.

"It won't work, Knight. History, man. When did intellectuals ever wage war? That's a Crom game."

"History?" Knight was almost weeping. "What do you know about it? You weren't here the past hundred years!"

"For that reason," Jane came back at him with a fervour equal to his, "we know more about it than you. We know that this culture is dying. In our time there was brave talk about the next big breakthrough, into the kingdom of the mind. People tackled ESP psionics, mind-expanding drugs, many things. But there were others, the pragmatists, who fought these ideas bitterly. And they won. The Crons won that battle too. Because they did not have that kind of mind. A blind man lives happily in the dark. He sees no need for light, doesn't believe it. Mind-to-mind communication, he says, is a myth!"

"That's right," Harker endorsed. "I was told that, too."

"You said yourself," she went on, "that they've sold themselves to the machine. Machines don't have ideas, don't think, have no enterprise, adventure, no dreams. Space-travel is moribund. That's a symptom. This machinery, and all the other stuff we've seen—Knight, we had all this, as good as this, back in our time. Progress has died. We don't need to fight the Crons!"

"You mean we should just sit back and wait?"

"Why not? I see from your mind that Venus is a pleasant place."

"But . . ." It was in his mind to say "What about vengeance?" and he made the beginnings of a gesture to include the kitchen serfs who had gathered around. Then he looked at them more closely, saw the unaccustomed fer-

vor on their faces. "You've done something," he said unsteadily. "To me, and to them. You've turned them on."

"There's the rest of your answer," Harker said heavily. "We can pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps, and leave the Crons to rot. We can show them, when the time comes, whether we're sub-human or not!"

"But we are!" Jane's voice drove at him like a spear. "Don't you see? That is the biggest mistake of all. We are the dreamers, the thinkers, the intellectuals. But we need the others, the practical ones, the pragmatists. To be properly human takes both. Divided we both fall. We can wait. We can develop ourselves. But when the time comes . . ."

A bell jangled to interrupt her. A viewscreen lit up on the wall to show a gorgeously disdainful blonde-curled woman's impatient face.

"Knight!"

"Yes, Glamor Margent, lady," Knight assumed his Nandy valence swiftly.

"Bring the new female serfs to me at once. I am waiting to dress!"

"At once, lady." He ducked humbly. The screen blanked. Jane moved, and smiled as she caught Gerda's arm.

"There are all sorts of ways in which an intelligent serf can control things. You'll tell us about the ship and the escape later, Knight. For the moment we have a part to play. But remember, as a very wise person said long ago, we must forgive them, the Crons, because they don't know what they are doing. They just don't know, poor things!"

PUBLIC SERVICE

by

SYDNEY J. BOUNDS

*Fire has always been one of the greatest hazards Man has had to face. In a huge city complex it could be a death trap.*

## PUBLIC SERVICE

THE city was high, wide and ugly; two hundred and fifty storeys high, crowding the entire length and breadth of the island, a teeming warren of inflammable miniflats. Somewhere in its humanity-congested structure a spark struck, hungry red tongues licked, a wall of flame exploded outward.

An alarm call went in to Fire Control headquarters.

From Control Sector H. Two-O a scarlet jet-copter shot up, whining expelled air, to direct the operation. Armoured hovertrucks, loaded down with fire-battle equipment, beetled out from the station yard, shrieking sirens clearing a path along traffic-jammed throughways that were hardly more than tunnels in the city honeycomb.

A few Inflams hurled abuse and missiles at the speeding trucks as they passed . . . "Down with F.C.! Down with the Flaming Cinders!"

"Bennett's boyos again," Section Officer Shane Riley commented as an empty plastican bounced off the safety glass of the cab. "What the hell do they expect to gain?"

His driver, a scarlet torch on each shoulder tab of his smoke-grey uniform, laughed. "Nut cases! They know they can't stop us."

The truck hurtled on towards the heart of the conflagration, the unruffled voice of the Firemaster in the 'copter came down over the air-to-ground radio link: "Phoenix One to all H. Two-O Salamanders. The fire is spreading fast through blocks seven thousand to seven thousand-nin . . ."

For a moment, Riley started. Jerry's flat was close to the danger area. Then he relaxed, smiling at the thought: Jerry wouldn't be home—he spent so much of his time at the

Historical Institute it had become a joke ... "Why don't you move in and sleep there?"

The Firemaster's voice continued: "Action to be taken—routine isolation."

It was nothing but routine isolation these days, Riley thought, disgusted. And still Control barely coped with the outbreaks; with the island city growing yearly higher and even more densely populated, it was time to try something new. Anything. These were desperate times.

The Salamander truck raced along on its air-cushion between towering walls, stopped at the intersection nearest the blaze and disgorged armour-clad men. Efficiently they unloaded their equipment and moved into action.

A mob—Bennett's Inflams again—harassed them and a struggle started up.

Watching, Riley snapped: "Hoses!"

The operation went smoothly; jets from high pressure hoses hit the mob, splitting their ranks and driving them back. Their howls of fury turned to frustration, were finally drowned out.

The firemen placed their charges. Fuses sparking, they turned and ran for the safety of the truck, climbed into the back. The door slammed.

"Task completed, sir," the Sub-section Leader reported.

Riley grunted acknowledgement, absorbed in watching a wall of red flame roar towards him, consuming block after block of miniflats; no matter how often he saw it, the sight still held a fascination for him. Eventually, a pall of smoke blotted the inferno from view, and he said: "Take her out."

His driver thrust one lever forward, jerked another back, and the truck turned in a tight arc. As they moved off, the explosive charges blasted, bringing untouched buildings crashing down around the fire area. Momentarily, the noise deadened the roar of the advancing flame-wall; then charges set off by other Salamanders went off in a maelstrom of sound that blotted it out completely.

The radio crackled to life again: 'Phoenix One calling.

Spot-on timing—outbreak contained. Report back to Control Sector."

A wide gulf had been blasted, encircling the fire to create a wind-break; and now powerful automatic pumps flooded the gap, pumping in millions of gallons of sea water to isolate the blaze, drowning like rats the horde of would-be evacuees fleeing death by burning.

Riley shivered, trying to close his ears to their screams, wondering how many thousands died this time? How many charred and water-logged corpses would be buried beneath the new dwelling blocks? It was a recurring nightmare.

The fire isolated and left to burn itself out, the Salamander headed back to H. Two-O at cruising speed—a broad, heavy armoured vehicle riding an air-cushion. Riley saw—already!—the gigantic mechanised builders lumbering in like elephantine robots to rebuild on top of the devastated area.

No time was lost in rehousing the ever-increasing population of the overcrowded island city. More blocks of inflammable miniflats would arise ...

Yet Fire Control was one never-ending battle, Riley reflected wearily. And they were losing the battle. Something else would have to be tried—but what?

The Salamanders grounded in the station yard; equipment was checked, explosive charges renewed ready for the next call. The jet-copter settled on the roof park.

Riley shot up in the express lift to the duty room to report.

The Firemaster, solid and grey-haired, a faint smile creasing his leathery face, had descended by the time Riley entered the long map-walled ops room.

"Nice job you did there, Shane—I knew you'd soon get into our routine."

"Thank you, sir." Riley had only recently been promoted to Section Officer. He was still on probation, still had to prove himself, so the Firemaster's words warmed him—

though he wondered why he had been suddenly elevated over the heads of more experienced men.

The Firemaster said, "Bennett tried it on again, I noticed. We'll have to fix that protest group of his—they're getting too damned impudent."

The station officer looked up from his desk, waving the latest issue of a flimsy plasti-paper. "Have you seen this, sir? The *Union*'s screaming for blood again—ours, of course."

The *Union* was Bennett's news-sheet, mouthpiece of the Inflam party. Riley took the paper and scanned headlines:

FIRE CONTROL—MASS MURDERERS FOR FIREPROOFS!

How much longer must we be at the mercy of this so-called public service? Why are only the top people and their lackeys fireproofed? It is past time for a full-scale investigation into . . .

He frowned as he read on. It was dreary stuff, and he'd seen it all before.

"They don't seem to realise that if it wasn't for us, the whole city would burn!" Riley's jaw hardened, his eyes smouldered; he didn't appreciate being called a lackey. "Listen to this! Bennett's demanding nothing less than fire-proofing for all miniflats; massive evacuation planning for all emergencies—"

The Firemaster cut in with a snort, "Bennett's a double-dealer! The economy can't stand that, and he knows it. Traffic conditions forbid any evacuation. The man should be put out of the way, his party outlawed."

"But something's got to be done," Riley said, and bit on his tongue, wishing he'd kept silent as the Firemaster glowered at him.

"I'll talk to you alone, Shane."

Riley followed him into the privacy of his office, a hallowed room decorated with Fire Control honours won by the Sector. The Firemaster sat heavily at his desk, polished bright, fingers drumming against the tele-communicator, watching him steadily.

"I hear you've been studying fiction, Shane—"

"History, sir."

The Firemaster, a man who had come up through the ranks, continued as if he had not spoken. "It won't do. You're a Section Officer and you have responsibilities. We're a realist service, have to be, and part of your job is to set an example. You should have lost this idealist taint by now. It's got to stop, or—you know what happens."

Riley knew, and winced: down-graded to Inflam and the loss of his fireproofed miniflat. The threat was terrifying; his bones felt as if they'd been suddenly turned to liquid—yet he couldn't keep his mouth shut.

"Is it true, sir, that Fire Control once used to save lives? That water was used to put out fires, not just contain them? I know it sounds incredible but—"

The Firemaster's hackles rose. "Heresy! Pure fiction. Remember your training course, the official records, it's all there, all you need to know. The city is everything, isolation our salvation." He intoned from the *Fire Manual*:

"Fire Control means sacrifice, the sacrifice of the few for the many . . . anyway, you know these fiction tapes are banned, so get that stuff right out of your head. Forget Bennett's lies. Now—" His voice toughened. "I don't want to have to speak to you about this again. Dismiss."

Worried, Riley went back through to the duty room, glancing at his chrono. The new shift was just coming on.

"Hi, Shane. Everything normal?"

"Yeah, routine stuff."

Riley signed off, took a shower and changed out of uniform. His mood was uneasy as he left the station; it was his turn to visit Jerry—and he always felt uncomfortable in one of the Inflam blocks.

He rode a moving-way bridge across a canyon between city areas, dreaming a little. When his promotion was confirmed, he'd press his own ideas of fire prevention . . . now he had a chance to go to the top, perhaps even make Firemaster himself one day. That would mean a three-cell

suite—fireproofed—and extra credit at the automat. He smiled briefly: it certainly paid to be a lackey.

Crossing from a Fireproof zone to Inflam, he flashed his pass at the checkpoint and escalated to Jerry's block, high above the city; here, the overcrowding was drastic and he felt hemmed in. There were no safety lanes in case of a fire-emergency and it took real effort to switch off his professional mind.

Jerry Drew lived in a cramped one-room cell at the very top of his block; and as Riley pressed the bell-push he wondered again at their odd friendship. Contact between Fireproofs and Inflams was not illegal but, socially, anything more than a casual acquaintance rarely developed. Yet he and Jerry had felt drawn to each other from their first meeting—and not simply because they had a common interest in the history of Fire Control.

Jerry opened the door and Riley walked in, dropped into the window seat beside the rim-wall, looking out over the city and the close-jammed mass of Inflam blocks. It was evening, and a blaze of lighted windows killed the sunset, a milliard glowing oblongs reaching to every horizon. He sat silent, staring across the high towers, imagining every one of those lights as a potential fire. He shuddered.

"You're far away tonight," Jerry said easily. "Something on your mind?"

Riley looked back, aware of Jerry's scented deodorant; a new brand and overpowering. Perfumes became increasingly less subtle as population density soared.

He shrugged. "Just the job, sometimes it gets on top of me." He glanced at the scratch meal his friend had prepared; fishcakes and dehydrated vegetables, standard hand-out for the Inflams.

As they ate, sirens wailed. A fresh blaze flared up across the roof-tops and lines tightened about Riley's mouth. His stomach refused to accept any more of the factory food. "Another one! The situation gets worse every day. Something's got to change or . . . well, I just can't see how it'll end."

He looked into Jerry's thin face, said, "Why don't you let me try to get you into Fire Control? I'm sure I could swing it."

Jerry smiled, shook his head. "No thanks. I agree something's got to change, but not that way. Not just for me, but for all Inflams."

Riley looked out to the distant fire, troubled. "Perhaps you don't realise just how serious the situation is? It's hard enough for us to cope now—even sacrificing the few for the many—but with the population still increasing I don't dare think of the future. There must be other, better ways of control."

"That's what Bennett says," Jerry commented, amused. "Maybe you two should get together—and you can, you know. There's a public meeting tomorrow, at Union Hall, and Bennett's speaking. No reason why you shouldn't go."

No reason at all, Shane thought drily, except the Firemaster wouldn't like it. "I'll be on duty," he said.

"Of course. Duty first, think later!"

Riley turned his back on the window. "You know the answer, part of it anyway. Inflams have no sense of responsibility, nothing to do all day, and that makes them careless—careless with breeding habits, careless with fire. They bring it on themselves. There are just too many of them."

"Is that from the handbook too?" Jerry asked mildly. "It's time you started thinking for yourself—or let Bennett do it for you! Naturally, we Inflams have nothing to do now that all production is automated in underground factories. But that doesn't mean we're useless, with no right to live. We're human too!"

He waved his hand at the tiny cramped living cell. "Can you see me starting a family here?"

Riley said, "The Fireproofs know what is best for the city."

"The Fireproofs know what is best for themselves," Jerry countered. "The Fireproofs are the new establishment—you've seen some of my history tapes. The Inflam party and

the *Union* represents the redundant—at least, that's how it started—at the moment I doubt if they represent anybody because the Fireproofs have the right of veto—”

“It's necessary,” Riley argued. “What government could afford to take notice of the opposition?”

“A democratic one,” Jerry returned promptly. “The sort of government we used to have before the fire service became Fire Control. You are the big whip the Fireproofs wield.”

“But that's history—before the Inflam blocks and the overcrowding. It was uneconomic to fireproof all cells.”

“History, remember that, Shane. History, not fiction.”

Riley sighed and lapsed into gloomy silence. The evening was turning out to be less than satisfactory. He wanted to forget Fire Control, but couldn't rid himself of the feeling that a potentially explosive situation was about to detonate.

Sometimes he felt that Jerry was trying to involve him in something the Firemaster would not approve of . . .

After he left and rode back to his own fireproofed flat, he lay sleepless on his foam pad. In the early hours, his tormented brain slipped gradually into a dreamworld where monstrous rats ran before an avalanche of water, rats with human faces, and he heard the screams of the burning. He woke soaked in sweat.

When he reported for duty, there was a new order clipped to his In-file :

Bennett's protest group are holding a public rally at Union Hall to seek support for a change in Fire Control methods. Large crowds are expected. All sections will stand by.

More trouble, Riley thought sourly, initialling it. There always seemed to be trouble between Inflams and Fireproofs now. He supposed Jerry would be at the meeting, shrugged into his uniform with the torch tabs on each shoulder and joined his crew in the duty room.

“Salamander checked and ready to go, sir,” his Sub-section Leader reported.

Riley nodded and sat down at the table in the corner, dialled for a mug of instant-Bev. His crew matched tarot cards while they waited for a call, a sure sign of tension. The air-conditioner hummed louder, working harder to remove chemibac fumes.

Time dragged . . .

The alarm blared and the crew sprinted for the yard. As Riley came to his feet, studying the board—twelve thousand block, he noted mentally; God, that would be Union Hall!—the door of the Firemaster's office flung open.

“Shane! In here, fast!”

Riley hurried in, closing the door behind him, disturbed by this interruption in routine.

“Something special has come up. I'm giving it to you because it's kind of delicate. Come through and you're made. Fail and——” The Firemaster made a chopping motion with one hand.

“I'll do my best, sir.”

The Firemaster paused, watching him. “The situation has changed. You may have wondered why you were promoted . . . well, I knew you were friendly with the Inflam, Drew, and that he was one of Bennett's lieutenants. The idea was that you could keep an eye on them, but now——A fire-raiser has been trapped,” the Firemaster said quietly. “The damn fool muffed the timing on his bomb when he tried for Bennett at Union Hall. He's caught in the blaze himself—and you're going to get him out!”

Riley stared back into the unsmiling leathery face, his brain whirling. The Firemaster had planned to use his friendship with Jerry . . . “You mean, he *deliberately*——?”

“Of course I mean deliberately. What else? It's time you grew up, Shane. How else do you suppose we keep the Inflam population down to a practical limit? City's way overcrowded as it is—without us, society would simply be impossible. It has to be done like this because it's the only way that works. Everything else we've tried has failed. So now you know what Fire Control really means . . .

“Only the top few in the establishment are in on it—and

the Firemasters, of course. But this is an emergency. The fire-raiser—and that's his official status—is Comber, one of our best men. God knows how he got in this mess, but you've got to bring him out. Clear? Other Salamanders will isolate the fire—that's not your job this time. Get moving."

It was on Riley's tongue to refuse, but he checked any outburst, knowing what would happen. Another Salamander would get the job, and he'd be downgraded to Inflam. Knowing what he did now, that was unthinkable . . .

He walked stiff-legged, in shock, into the yard where his driver and crew waited, and climbed into the truck. "Twelve thousand block," he said, his voice steady; no one must guess how shaken he was. Routine, he thought; stick to routine, treat it just like any other outbreak.

The Salamander hurtled away, siren screaming, along one of the island-city's throughways. Riley sat in grim silence, seething, a pot on the boil. Why had he never suspected the truth? It was obvious now, all this emphasis on isolating a fire and leaving it to burn out . . . flooding the wind-break . . . "sacrifice the few for the many" . . . "there are just too many of them!"

Cold sweat oozed, gumming his uniform. Sick horror crouched like cramp in his stomach. He was on his way to save a fire-raiser, a man who cold-bloodedly caused uncounted deaths, leaving the innocent to burn. And what could he do except go through with it?

His driver stopped at the intersection before twelve thousand and looked questioningly at him. The crew were all expectant; they'd guessed something out of the ordinary was going on.

Peering through the cab window, Riley saw flames and smoke rise up to engulf whole blocks of miniflats—and somewhere in there, was Union Hall, and Jerry. Was he even alive?

"I'll take her in alone," he said dully. "This is a special job. It means going to the heart of the blaze and one man can handle it. Move over, driver—crew bale out."

His driver started to protest: "Sir——"

"Orders! All out—and snap it up!"

As the last of his crew dropped through the hatch, Riley rammed the hovertruck forward, into a gap between burning buildings. Plasti-sheet walls crumpled, melting around him. Detonations blasted as other Salamanders built a fire-break. He was caught in a trap if his truck failed him now . . .

But it seemed he'd been living in a trap anyway. The Firemaster using him to get at Bennett. Had Jerry been using him too to spy on Fire Control?

Suddenly, he was ice-cool. The years of Fire Control training took over, torment ended, and he knew what he had to do: Get Comber out!

His radio carried the Firemaster's voice, steady as a rock, down to him: "Phoenix One here, Shane. Comber's at the junction of twelve thousand and Gamma nine."

Riley acknowledged, switched on his infra-red searchlight and ploughed into smoke. He kept his attention rigidly on his routing, ignoring the violence of flaming wreckage, the screams of the dying. It was a nightmare trip into hell; the swirl of smoke, lit by greedy red tongues, the jumbled heaps of ruins to negotiate, the all-consuming roar of the fire, the secret horror locked in his mind.

He rode an air-cushion through the warren of Inflam cells, an eerie tunnel in the great city's honeycomb. The rendezvous point showed ahead, and a figure in asbestos suiting and smoke mask waved him down. He punched open the door and smoke came in, quickly followed by Comber.

Riley slammed the door again, worked his levers and turned the Salamander, heading back through the heat of the inferno. Extractors got rid of the last of the smoke from the cab. Beside him, the fire-raiser ripped off his mask to reveal a prim ascetic face, pursed lips, fair hair.

Comber coughed delicately. "A nice blaze," he murmured. "It should take care of Bennett for us. Glad to see you though—thought I'd cooked myself this time."

*It should take care of Bennett, and Jerry, and thousands*

of other *Inflams* . . . "You've done it before then?" Riley heard his own voice, high-pitched, quavering.

Comber removed contact lenses, polished and replaced them. "Plenty of times—after all it's my job. *Inflam Control*, we call it."

Riley drove recklessly, teeth grinding. *Inflam Control*. Human beings murdered by the tens of thousands, incinerated, drowned. He felt sick. Comber filled him with such revulsion he could not look at him.

Through the cab window, orange flame sheeted . . . the result of Comber's fire-bomb. At an intersection just ahead, a party of men made a dash for it, trying to fight a way out on foot. They hadn't a hope . . .

As Riley approached, he instinctively slowed the truck.

Comber straightened in his seat, turning with alarm on his face. "What are you doing? They're *Inflams* out there!"

But Riley was staring at one chalk-white face, a face he recognised. "Jerry!" he exclaimed hoarsely, and stopped the truck.

The fire-raiser's gaze flickered out to the men, now running towards them. His voice lifted. "That's Bennett there, and the whole point of the operation is to eliminate him. So you can't—"

"Shut up," Riley snarled, and opened the cab door. "I'm giving them a lift."

Comber's hand came up sharply, bringing a gun with it, pointing it at Riley. "Close the door and get moving," he said coldly.

Riley shrank back in his seat, edging away . . . at least Jerry and Bennett were trying to change things . . . he heard a *psss* of compressed air, felt sharp stabbing pain in his shoulder. Anger surged through him; a terrible anger with the system, with the Firemaster for abetting it, and his anger focused on the man beside him.

He hurled himself at Comber, grappled with him, his strength increased ten-fold in his wrath. He was done with *Fire Control* . . . never again would he be a lackey . . . a bone splintered and Comber made an animal sound as the

gun slipped from his grasp. Berserk, Riley grimaced through a blood-red haze, lifting Comber bodily and hurling him from the truck.

That finished it, he thought; now he felt almost clean.

"Jerry," he shouted, throat hoarse as smoke choked the cab. "This way—hurry!"

A big man, broad and heavy, with a crag-hewn face filled the door of the cab. "What's this game?" he demanded savagely, lifting a massive fist. "What new devilry are you bastards up to?"

Jerry held on to the big man's arm. "It's Shane, Bennett. Shane Riley, remember I told you about him."

Bennett stared at Riley, grunting, then climbed into the seat beside him. Jerry and the rest of the party crammed into the back of the truck.

"Well," Bennett repeated, "what's the game?"

"Saving your neck," Riley answered. "And don't ask me why because I'm not sure, not sure of anything any more. Hold tight back there."

He set the Salamander in motion, plunging into a new flame-wall.

The suspicion gradually faded from Bennett's face. "So Jerry got through to you?"

Riley nodded, concentrating on finding a way out of the inferno. The ground shuddered, heaved, as twin towers collapsed and a bridge crashed down in a tangle of molten debris and showering sparks. Smoke billowed in clouds around the ruined stumps of buildings. Flames danced. It's *Gotterdammerung*, he thought dully.

He tried to blot from his mind the sight of charred bodies, bodies of men and women and children . . . fought down anger that threatened his reason. On and on he drove, the blaze seeming to stretch for ever . . .

Then, abruptly, the Salamander jarred to a grinding halt. A towering mound of wreckage blocked their way, a mountainous heap that not even the hovertruck could surmount. Trapped! Riley felt desperate. They could not go back. It was forward—somehow—or perish.

"The end," Bennett said coolly. "But it was a nice try."

"We're not done yet." Riley's shoulder hurt like hell as he yanked the levers; he felt a driving need to survive, to fight back against a system that condemned men to a horrible death.

He turned the Salamander and zig-zagged back a few yards, felt her settle on uneven ground, tipped at an uncomfortable angle. He glanced into the back of the truck.

"Jerry—in the rack beside you—an explosive charge!"

Jerry passed him the charge and Riley set a short fuse and hurled it out.

They waited, tensed up, in gloom lit by hell-flares. Seconds dragged by. The blast could damage the truck, Riley thought, but it was this one chance or nothing.

The explosion came—a sheet of flame, a sound of thunder—rocking them, clearing a path ahead. A prayer on his lips, Riley gripped the levers and gave the powerful twin motors full throttle . . . and raced through the gap.

"Where to?" he asked.

Bennett and Jerry exchanged a glance; Jerry nodded, and Bennett said: "The Historical Institute. We've a secret place in the vaults that'll hide you and this vehicle. It'll serve us again."

Jerry grinned. "A rogue fire-truck!"

"Yeah," Riley said, ripping the torch tabs from his uniform, "We're all Inflams together now."

He drove into steam, a great white cloud dense as fog as flood water from the automatic pumps hit fierce heat. The Salamander began to rise, gently, riding the surge of flood water. They were almost out of the devastation area, and he glimpsed one of the elephantine mechanised builders lumbering in to rebuild.

His radio screeched: "Phoenix One calling! Shane—" He switched off the Firemaster.

Bennett said: "We'll have to fix your shoulder." Then his voice hardened. "Don't get any wrong ideas, mister—we're not fighting for abstract ideals, just plain survival. We've

got a whole system to buck, and a lot of people are going to die before we change it. Maybe you, maybe me . . .

"But with a Fire Control officer with us—and you're the first to come over—there's a chance. There'll be others join us now. You've given me our first real hope of winning."

THE FERRYMAN ON THE RIVER

*by*

DAVID KYLE

*Hector was a collector, a salvager, basically a scavenger—and the commodity he dealt in was human lives. Easy enough, when handled singly, but two at once complicated the system.*

## THE FERRYMAN ON THE RIVER

HECTOR, the salvager, stood patiently in two places at once, waiting for the almost-corpse to fall from the sky. On top of the bridge, on the open platform of the observation tower, he stood, with his arms folded across his chest, while seven hundred feet below, in the submerged boat hidden by the shadows of the concrete pier, he stood again. The machinery in the boat was humming, throwing out the intricate web of force in a thirty-yard cube. What he saw, heard, felt, was limited almost entirely to the eyes of his projection, high up. He was only faintly conscious of the dim vision of the control panel on the console before him in the tiny submarine and the tower's concrete floor was more solid and steady to his materialised feet than was the slightly heaving deck. On the tower he was wearing a black overcoat over his silver-grey coveralls, a black fedora on his head. His serious, curious eyes, partly hidden by dark glasses, never deviated from the continual scrutiny of the man called Alan.

Alan stood by the four-foot wall, hugging the shabby raincoat about his gaunt body. His chin was tucked into the upturned collar so that the grim lines around his mouth were shielded. The skin was tight across his cheekbones and he loosened it with a slight grimace of his hidden lips, but, though his eyes watered slightly with their fixed stare, he didn't blink. Across the river were the skyscrapers, stiff grey ghosts lost in the mist which hung over the city. From the shoreline came the muted muttering of the metropolis, rumblings from within the gauzy dampness of its shrouded canyons.

Hector watched the man's tense profile and felt his

mood. The day was appropriate. It was a weeping day, with each raindrop a particle of sadness, yet, to anyone about to do what Alan was planning, there was beauty in the day, too, the beauty of purity, peace and infinite unity, a promise of release. He could sense Alan's tortuous rationalisation—out of the chaos of mankind, here, in reverence on the platform of the tower, it . . .

It would take Alan only a few quick movements. Hector knew that Alan at any moment would jump to the top of the wall and, before the guard could stop him, sail himself into space. The sad young man would enjoy the weightless flight into freedom. Such ecstasy could cancel out the horror of the landing, with no thought to the impact on the river, though it would be there—sharp, decisive, releasing him into the peace he sought. Hector, however, knew better. The suicide would not be that way.

Alan's lips were moving. "I have the courage." The quiet words were the whispered echo of his thought.

Alan wasn't at all conscious of Hector's presence. He turned his head to the left, deliberately casual, rubbing his moist palms dry against his thighs, and studied the people near him. Hector did the same. A dozen feet from them two men were talking earnestly; their suits were clean and neat, their shoes polished, their faces as unwrinkled as their clothes. Then Alan noticed Hector—the tall figure in a black overcoat and hat, arms folded over chest, eyes hidden by an enormous pair of dark glasses. To Alan, sensitive and susceptible, Hector knew his dark projection might seem like the spectre of Death.

Ten feet from Alan a woman stood by the wall, gazing into space. Beyond her, backed against the stone of the bridge's tower, were two more men—one was in uniform. The guard. Nervously, Alan focused his attention quickly on the woman. She was short and thin. Her worn black coat was shapeless. A black felt hat mashed her dark hair down behind her raised collar. As he started towards the wall she half turned and, with her left hand, lifted her shiny black plastic handbag to the top of the retaining wall. Alan

awkwardly stopped. She had begun to adjust her clothing, unbuttoning her coat.

There was a sudden movement to the right. The man nearest the woman stalked towards them and stopped beside her. He picked up the handbag and offered it to her. "I'm sorry, Miss," the man said. "You're not permitted to place anything on the wall." Her head was tilted up, but she did not reply, nor did she seem to note the searching look the man gave her before moving off a few yards.

Both Hector and Alan were startled by the plainclothes guard. Alan looked nervously around and for the second time seemed apprehensive about the black-overcoated figure of Hector standing immobile in the same position, arms folded, dark lenses turned vacantly in his general direction. Down below at river level the real Hector sighed loudly and spoke to his own reflected face in the vision screen of his projection equipment: "Come on, Alan, let's get this over with."

Both Hector and Alan were looking at the woman. The bag slipped from her hand and struck the stone floor and an assortment of objects scattered themselves around her feet. Alan, obviously welcoming the chance to take some physical action, hurried to her side and bent to recover her things. The plainclothes guard fidgeted, moved towards them, then away.

Alan stood up, handed her the bag and said, "Are you all right?"

She took her bag, but didn't thank him. Her face was smooth and white and though her eyes looked into his they seemed sightless.

Although the apparition on the tower remained stiff and silent, the Hector down below snorted and commented loudly. "That was a silly question. Keep calm. Don't create suspicion."

"I mean . . ." Alan said, becoming crafty, ". . . would you like a cigarette?" When she said nothing, though her eyes were seeing him now, for the first time, he insisted, "Have a cigarette," but she shook her head. A mixture of irritation

and melancholia passed over his face. He's being rejected again, Hector thought. "Have a cigarette!" His voice was harsh.

She turned from staring ahead at the clouds to face him. This time there was colour in her face and her eyes were sharp and clear. Dark blue eyes, unbeautiful because they were so bleak, like the world—impersonal, selfish, lonely. However, she was oblivious as to how she appeared to him, so she said, "Don't bother me. Leave me alone. Do you understand? Leave me alone." She bared her teeth.

Hector was shocked by her violence. He saw by the frank expression in the widened eyes that Alan was too. But whereas Alan was merely shocked by the rude emotionalism, Hector was shocked by the potential situation it suggested. Good God! Hector thought, is she another quarry for me? Did she, like Alan, have unloving parents, a domineering brother, or a lover who had never loved her? Did she have a note in her pocket, a revenge upon them all, like Alan did?

"Damn you," Alan was saying, emphasising the curse by enunciating deliberately. "You're typical. Thanks for the companionship. Yeah. Thanks for helping me remember what I came here for."

Her mouth was quivering. She passed a hand across a suddenly damp brow and muttered, "I'm sorry." Her face was as pale as the clouds.

Alan, Hector noted with pitying humour, was resentful of her abject surrender with its confusing contradiction and could only bring himself to say, "Sure."

A sudden awareness came into her reddened eyes like that of a sleep-walker startled into contact with reality. "Who are you?" she demanded.

"Alan," was the reply, and Hector was beginning to get worried. This girl was tearing away the flimsy network of detachment the man had prepared for himself for this moment and was forcing him back into the concrete world by making him aware of his own identity.

"I'm mixed up," she said.

"You're mixed up? The whole world's mixed up! The whole world!"

"Yes!" she said. Her hand was a claw which dug into her lower lip, pulling the flesh from the base of her eyes. The fingers seemed to be fighting back a scream.

Alan clutched her skinny shoulders and commanded, "Cut that out! Pull yourself together!" Hector knew that if she screamed Alan's plan would be destroyed and, fortunately, Alan knew it too.

She began to weep softly. Her face was like the day, softly moist and misty, not darkly wet.

"Life is lousy," the man said, "but don't blame yourself. Just accept it, that's all. Go home and you'll feel better tomorrow."

Why don't you tell her, Hector thought scornfully, that she could always kill herself, like you. That would really sabotage this whole insane moment on top of the tower and they could all call the whole thing off and go home and feel better tomorrow. Except that Hector might not feel better because he had failed to get the merchandise he had promised and his enigmatic employers would be displeased...

"I want to die," she said.

Alan was dumbfounded, veins suddenly swelling on his neck above his collar and muscles twitching spasmodically.

Hector had seen the revelation developing, but the coincidence of having a second young, healthy specimen appear at the critical moment was none the less unnerving.

"Die?" Alan's voice said. Perhaps the world might flow over Alan like ice water and wash away his madness; Hector almost, but not quite, for a moment hoped so.

"Die?" the girl echoed. Her face was weirdly blank, the thin pink wrinkles fading into the whiteness of her complexion. "Did I say die?" When he nodded, she said, "Of course I didn't mean it." She stared into space. "It was a foolish thing to say. I didn't mean it."

He doesn't believe that, Hector thought. Not for one minute.

"You must not want to die," the man said. "It's not right."

Oh-oh, thought Hector. Will he reflect on his own words?

"Of course not," she said.

"No, no," he said. He shook her roughly. "I mean it. You mustn't want to die!"

She broke from his grasp and took a step back. "Leave me alone," she said.

"Listen," he said. "I came up here to commit suicide. Promise me you won't and I won't do it."

She looked at him with new eyes, as though he had torn a mask from his face. He met that look, probing hers to see if his words had taken effect. He was not certain of what he found and neither was Hector. Below in the submarine Hector quickly confirmed that his machinery had power for two.

"You?" she asked. "You?" She laughed, the sound a hollow moan.

"Yes."

Hector understood how the man wanted her to believe him, wanted her to face the disaster present in his own life that she might gain strength from his words to conquer herself. Perhaps now, though—Hector reflected—more than ever Alan would have to execute his own destruction to maintain what little self-respect he had. Ironic, wasn't it? Alan was trying to be a salvager too, although hardly in the bizarre manner of Hector and his magic box.

"You?" She laughed again. "You, too?"

The recognition of the significance of that "too" the instant she spoke it made Alan's eyebrows rise.

"You *must* not," he said, with decisiveness. "Have some pity. Save yourself and you'll save me."

Hector could have laughed—the man begging pity from one whom he pitied.

"What's your name?" he asked, to complete the exchange and make themselves entities, individuals to each other.

"Nancy," she said.

"Please leave me, Nancy," he said. "Please go inside."

She frowned. Her lips trembled and she was about to speak when suddenly there was a loud noise, buzzing. It was the warning to those on the platform that the visiting hours were over and that everyone must leave.

A guard came out of the revolving door to call out in a coarse voice, "Closing time! Everyone inside!"

Nancy gave a little cry. She pushed Alan away violently and threw herself upon the wall. Her pocketbook fell to the wet stone floor again. She had her right knee on top and she was drawing the rest of her body up when he recovered himself and lunged for her. She was completely up now and she pitched forward into space. He saw her face, white and strained, looking back at him and pleading silently for him to let her go.

He almost hesitated too long.

His hands went around her legs and he hung on to them with the power of terror. Her body twisted in his grasp and he slipped on the wet stone. The guard was nearly at his side, reaching out with helping hands. Hector moved closer and Alan saw the black overcoat shouldering clumsily in between; the guard's hands were knocked away—the girl's legs were sliding through Alan's arms rapidly now until, in horror, he was embracing nothing. She was gone.

Alan turned back instantly. Hector knew that Alan wanted the immediate moral support of another human being—a shred of comfort and understanding and the kinship of mutually-shared tragedy from the people around him. But Hector could not afford even the briefest of moments. Hector's projection would fade out within the next few seconds while, down below, he was preparing for the catch. He tried to give Alan a friendly, sympathetic look—after all, there had merely been an unimportant switch in the merchandise—but he couldn't help thinking, you tried to save her but you failed. You failed her—and yourself again—but then you're just a born loser ...

Because Hector was just on the point of withdrawal, he

didn't anticipate Alan's new-found bitter courage. The impulse by Alan to join the girl—to find peace together with her in the river—took Hector by surprise. And the guard, too. The guard was still against the parapet, leaning over, looking down with disbelief at the falling body of the girl when Alan flung himself over.

At first Alan felt no wind. Then as he gathered momentum in his plunge the air rushed forcefully around him, trying to buoy him up.

He suddenly cried out, "I'm going to die!" Panic and terror seized him, not the peace and ecstasy he had expected. "It's a mistake!" he shouted at the frantic wind, "I don't want to die!"

He hit, then, with a soft and soundless impact, going down, down, down as though for miles into a yielding substance like jellied air. His breathing had stopped and his lungs were on fire. "This is drowning!" he thought, and flailed desperately with his arms and legs to work himself to the surface of the river.

For several hours he seemed to struggle upwards through the glutinous space around him.

Finally he opened his eyes in the electric lighted room and saw the dark overcoated figure. There was no furniture and there were no walls.

"I am Hector," the man said, as he removed the oversized dark glasses from his eyes.

Alan's head roared and thumped, whirled and throbbed under the chaos and bewilderment of the moment. In his confusion he still felt himself mostly back on the observation tower preparing for his own destruction. Had anything really happened? Was he still on the bridge with his wildly anticipating thoughts? The past seemed more real than the present and the real was not and could not be.

Alan had been looking into the eyes of Hector, but not seeing until now. Now the eyes appeared startlingly clear out of the fog of his confusion, emerging like twin moons from behind the veiling clouds. They had the glitter of cold night light, like the moon, remote and impersonal, and yet

they were not inhuman and not unsympathetic. The corneas were grey, squeezing together the two black pupils in a featureless face.

Suddenly the woman Nancy was next to him, slumped in a large leather easy-chair. He, too, was sunk into the cushions of another chair. The trivial thought rose and took over his mind that the chairs were made of vinyl, not leather. And then came that recognition of the dark figure from the tower. It flooded back into his mind bringing terror with it. The eyes into which he stared now were once more friendly, yet impersonal and dispassionate, the same stunning look that had sent him to his death.

But was he dead?

"Where am I?" Alan said, not expecting any answer.

"You and the girl are in limbo," the strange man said. Alan imagined he almost saw a cynical smile. He tried to bring details into focus, to see the man's face and the silvery grey clothed body, but all he could really see were those eyes.

"You are in the home of Hector, on your way to make a trip."

Again, suddenly, Alan saw another object. It seemed to spring to life before his eyes. It was a smooth white box, a cube of about six feet in every dimension. There was an open door in it.

"Go inside!" Hector commanded.

Alan pushed himself up automatically, ready to obey, when he caught Nancy's glance. Something deeply personal in the look froze his movement and made his heart pound. There was a sickening flash within his brain and his vision came back completely as though lightning had permanently illuminated a stormy twilight and had shattered completely the veil in which he had been wrapped. The room was now clearly revealed. An ordinary living room, although exceptionally large, with that box resting in the middle of it on a terrazzo floor.

Hector's eyes seemed ordinary now, too, and so was the

strong florid face, a handsome face which had the slightest look of surprise and annoyance.

"I'm afraid you've broken the spell," Hector said, and heaved a prodigious sigh. "I've never handled two persons at once before."

"What is this?" Alan said, more bewildered than ever, now that the sense of reality had driven the paralysing sense of a nightmare from his being. "I can't be—we can't be dead." He began to sob, great emotional bursts of air were choking within and bursting from his throat. Tears flooded into his eyes and poured down upon his cheeks. "What—what has happened?" he spluttered. "What—what has happened?"

Hector sighed again and sat down. He crossed his knees, carefully adjusting the crease of his silvery grey trousers over the angle of his right shin. "You want to take your life—both of you, as a matter of fact. Although the girl's unexpected appearance at the very moment of your decision was an unexpected—and, I thought—fortuitous coincidence. I was after you." Hector pulled a cigar from his breast pocket and lit it with studied care. "I picked up your trail weeks ago, at the time you visited the bridge, with your suicidal inclinations written all over your face." He tilted back his head and blew the smoke slowly towards the high ceiling. "I planned your salvation then. I didn't know about the girl." He shrugged indifferently. "A quick decision on my part. A few twists of the controls and I could handle you both on the way down. Could save you both."

Alan shook his head slowly in disbelief. Save us? Wait for us to jump? Save us on the way down? He turned and looked at Nancy. Her face was pale and taut, her eyes were dull and inattentive.

"I have saved you," Hector emphasised. "Although, in effect, you are dead. You did give up your life, you know, and there are witnesses who saw your leap and the splashes in the river." Hector smiled modestly around the cigar which he held just touching his firm, pink lips. "The splashes were mine, of course. Two well-timed, well-placed

blows from the under layer of the net. Just two taps on a button while you were being whisked inside."

Alan seemed to recall the whisking sensation. After the age-long cushioned impact there had been a side-wise jerk, a plunge into a compartment next to another body, a jab of a needle. "Then we aren't dead!" It was strange to have to say it to reassure himself. And it was a thrilling, exhilarating fact to know he was still alive.

"Oh, but my boy," Hector said gravely, "insofar as the rest of the world knows, you *are* dead." The man's big face, with its large nose bony at the bridge and fleshy at the tip, looked like a superior court judge trying to be sympathetic to a hobo. "You disowned the world, you know."

Alan felt his mingled fear and self-pity crumbling under the wave of anger and frustration which was rising within him. The damn world! The Goddamn world! Even his death was a failure! He wiped the tears away from his eyes and cheeks roughly and impatiently with the backs of his hands.

"But I'm not dead!" Alan said. To his own ears his voice was shrill and plaintive. "And she isn't dead!" He reached out and fiercely took one of Nancy's limp hands. "Why do you talk this way? What do you want of us?"

"I've given you another life," Hector said simply. "Aren't you glad?"

"How can I be glad?" Alan answered, one hand compulsively kneading hers while his other hand rubbed his face and hair to relieve the pain from his tortured thoughts. "I think I'm crazy. I don't know what this other life is you talk about. I don't understand—I must be mad!"

"It's certainly unusual for you," the man said drily. "It is for me, too. This hasn't happened before for me, either. I mean, having to discuss it."

Alan couldn't comprehend. Perhaps he was in a hospital, delirious, dying from his fall. It was a dream...

"No doubt it would be best if I explained," Hector said. He aimed carefully and dropped his smouldering cigar down the hollow stem of the standing ashtray near his right

elbow. "Through some strange circumstances, I have a strange job. At first I simply put myself at the appropriate spot, recovered half-dead bodies and turned them over to my—ah—clients. It wasn't very efficient. Sometimes it was downright messy. So they gave me the machines I required to do the job effectively. I don't plunge into icy waters with drowning psychotics any more, risking my own mortal life. I just set up my net of force, zip them into my underwater launch and package them off. Either hypnotised or drugged. So, you see I've never had to explain before."

"Hypnotised? Drugged?" Alan said weakly.

"Yes. It insures secrecy and avoids any recriminations or hysterics. I'm a very good hypnotist, you understand. With a disordered mind—if you'll forgive the allusion—I find it frequently easy to observe the entire process. To be at any spot, as a viewer that is, at any critical time without physically leaving my control point. Of course, such abilities naturally attracted my clients to me. That's how I got into the business."

Business? Alan thought. The salvation business. An angel from heaven, perhaps? Or a devil from hell?

"The business of salvaging." Hector permitted himself a chuckle. "I salvage worthless lives. Well, anyhow, lives that are about to be forfeited voluntarily. No harm in that."

All Alan could manage was, "Why?"

Hector's eyebrows rose casually. "Why not?" Then they came down in a frown and he said, "You really mean for them. Why do *they* want you?" The frown lightened but still stayed there. "This is part of a great, oh very great, scientific investigation. They want specimens, live specimens to examine. Not to hurt in any way," he added hastily. "Just to examine. So I'm a collector. Somebody or something wants a specimen of a human being as a sort of companion, perhaps, to exchange understanding, and I get it."

"You're a kidnapper?" Alan was incredulous.

Hector looked disgusted. "Of course not. I'm a—a col-

lector. A collector of poor lost souls. And I give them a chance at a second and better life."

"How do you know that?" Alan more and more was recognising this man as the madman. Not he, Alan, but this Hector was the insane one. He had to get away from him. And he had to save Nancy, too. Somehow the poor, helpless girl had become his responsibility. He couldn't die at this point; his life had changed; he couldn't be shut away with her in some madman's sanatorium, living playthings, to be experimented upon . . .

"... because." Hector was saying, the words seemingly far away, barely registering on his consciousness, "... because I have had assurances. Believe me, if I could go I'd have them take me. But I'm not the type. I have to live my own life." Hector stopped frowning. "Besides, there is the inevitability of no turning back. It's an unknown." He jabbed his finger at Alan. "You were willing to face the unknown. That's why it is so fitting and proper for you to go."

Alan began to look for the best way out of the room. He knew he had to be surreptitious. There was no doubt in his mind that Hector was a madman. Clever, with superhuman powers and super fantastic machines, but none the less mad. Perhaps—a cold chill ran up the back of his head and into his hair—perhaps even a murderer.

Hector was looking at the woman. Alan gave her a quick glance. She had visibly recovered and her complexion was pleasantly smooth and white without the ugly lines of tension that were there when Alan had first seen her in Hector's "home". Obviously, though, she had barely any comprehension of the situation or of what Hector was saying. Drugged, maybe, or vilely hypnotised. "That poor girl," Hector was saying, "look at her. She needs help. Where I'll send her she'll get it." He turned back towards Alan and took a step in his direction. He was only a few strides away; perhaps a quick overpowering lunge . . . No, Hector was too big and strong. "Give me a hand with her, will you? Get her into the box. The quicker she gets medical attention the better."

Alan half rose, crouching as if to protect the girl. "You're inhuman!" he said.

"Oh, no!" Hector's protest was emphatic. "I'm a human, all right. I'm one of you. I'm unusual but I'm no freak and I'm no . . ." He gestured impatiently. "Help me lift her in." He grasped her hands to help her to her feet.

Alan sprang up and raised his hands in an awkward fighting pose. "We don't have to obey you! You let us go!"

"Come now," Hector said gently, half supporting the girl with one strong arm, the other raised in front of him palm out. "You willingly surrendered up your lives on this dear earth. Remember?"

"I remember," Alan said bitterly. "You made me jump!"

"Made you jump?" Hector said, puzzled.

"Yes." Alan recalled vividly the dispassionate eyes at the moment of his indecision atop the tower. And he remembered, too, how the black figure had shouldered the guard aside. "That guard would have helped me," Alan said rapidly, realising the truth of his own words. "You didn't want her to live. You interfered, so she fell when I could have saved her. And then you stood next to me hoping I would go after her. You didn't want to save us! You wanted to destroy us!" He was nearly screaming, almost hurling the charge at the man with the intense conviction of an irrefutable truth.

Hector's face didn't flicker a muscle, but with astonishing rapidity it went from robust pink to sallow. From that sickly, stiffened mask came the words: "My God, you're right!"

Hector's whole attitude changed. He let go of the girl and stepped towards Alan. She slowly sagged to the stone floor in front of the door to the machine. Alan did not give ground, still holding his hands, fists clenched, before him. If he had had the courage he would have flung himself at the larger man and beat at him mercilessly. But he didn't have the courage because the man was larger and the effect would have been futile.

"I hope you realise," Hector said softly, "I didn't de-

liberately influence you. Any participation by me was the result of your own imagination." Hector's face reflected troubled thoughts as he continued, "That's no excuse, of course—interference, even unwitting, is against my principles." Hector's eyes gazed distantly over Alan's head while his voice dropped lower in pitch and volume. "I could try to make your trip voluntary—I could say you and the girl could have a tolerably happy, new and different life if you were to step into the box. You might think of yourselves as guests and even have a chance to come back—with your memories erased for your own protection, naturally—but that'd be more meddling and maybe even deceitful. Selective amnesia won't work either. Frankly, I'm in one helluva fix."

Hector looked down at Alan, this time, it seemed, studying him, evaluating him. Alan, teetering on the edge of nervous collapse, was driving his nails fiercely into his palms, frantic in his determination to withstand any seduction by the words of the stranger. He understood, now, with simple clearness what could have happened. A clever, unscrupulous hypnotist looks for a despondent victim, one who is lonely and unwanted in the world. The purpose was unlawful, probably a modern version of slavery. Such could explain this whole, weird situation. He wanted his miserable life back and he would die to keep it.

Hector seemed to blur before his eyes. Alan for a moment felt dizzy and faint but he shook his head and cleared his vision. His tormentor seemed defenceless at that instant, arms hanging down loosely at his sides and head bowed. Without thinking, without any self-destructive introspection, Alan acted. He straightened his arms and drove his slender body at the enemy. Hector staggered back at the first light touch, his heels caught on the girl's limp body and he flipped backward through the open door of the box.

There was a quick snap. Hector had disappeared inside. And then there was a bang. The box vanished.

Alan frantically pulled the girl to her feet and half-dragged her towards the foyer before her own legs began to

carry her weight. He was desperate to get out of the building and away, far away, before they could stop. Then, far away, they could rest and live again.

Hector watched them go.

Hector stood behind one of the chairs with arms folded across his chest and watched them go. Now he hurriedly stretched, rubbed his temples and stalked to the closet. The box would soon be back, having been found empty, without even his projection inside which had triggered the journey. He pulled out a coil of nylon rope, a small metal case, several mesh nets, two unlabelled aerosol cans and a sawed-down shotgun. In the centre of the room he spread the objects on the floor next to where the box would reappear, except for the shotgun which he stuffed under a seat cushion.

Most likely they would send the box back empty. They couldn't know his perspective had shifted, his aspirations shaken up and changed. He'd been a slaver, not a salvager, betraying, not helping his fellow humans—a witless body-snatcher assisted by a magic box. He didn't just expect, he hoped, that the box would return empty to challenge him to make his first intriguing trip. But sooner or later—and Hector permitted himself a sardonic chuckle—mankind would have a few specimens from the other side of the interstellar fence.

TESTAMENT

by

VINCENT KING

*We shall probably never know whether the Galaxy teems with sentient life or whether we are alone in the vastness; whether, in fact, we are part of some cosmic accident. The variations, however, make interesting science fiction.*

## TESTAMENT

THAT planet, *the one, the one in question*, Rim Sector 3m2t670/zx, was special—you've got to understand that. It was the last for one thing, the last one of all, the ultimate, the most remote planet-bearing system in the Galaxy. It was the last that Exploration Corps got to, the last to be explored . . . the final confirmation of our loneliness . . . or the last hope of finding . . .

*That is understood. We prefer not to think of that. Get down to facts. Explain yourself. Explain your actions and the events leading to this Tribunal.*

I was alone. I was detached from the Ship itself, in a unipersonal cruiser—fully equipped, of course—investigating this last insignificant one planet system, 3m2t670, while the Ship operated in the planet-rich systems of Rim Sector zy.

*Spare us this stale news—the obvious. We know all this. Proceed to events which are of significance.*

The Robotics were completing their analysis of oceanic conditions and of the high rock masses. As usual there had been nothing—the usual complex giant molecules—the mineral soup frozen in its existence just that one step short of life. Of course I didn't expect anything. Nobody did . . . it was the end of the line. It was depressing, this culmination, this inevitable end of millennia of crushing disappointment. It was the end of our tour . . . this was the last planet.

Then, incredibly, a Robotic probe reported Formations of Interest in the central highlands of the large continental rock mass. I decided the report merited personal investigation. I took a day-suit.

*Day-suit? How far were these Formations from your cruiser centre?*

One third of a day by power day-suit.

*Leaving one third of a day for investigation?*

I did not seriously expect real Evidence of Interest. Time was also short. There was little provision or room left. Robotics have mistakenly reported Intelligent Structures of Interest many times before.

*Nil response. Carry on.*

Will you accept direct recourse to my record?

*Is it true version? Is it accurate and total recall of your sensations, perceptions and all relevant thought trials?*

Yes. I certify it is direct transmission to my cruiser bank tracks and also to the main banks on the Ship proper from all my sensory and mental structures.

*Carry on.*

Thank you. Record proceeds:

I leave then this dome. It is still night. Soon it will be morning and a little warmer. There are many stars yet. I formulate:

Far, far . . . remote, remote. The ultimate edge of matter, the very rim. The outermost shivering leaf on the outermost twig of the ultimate tree of the forest Galaxy. I . . . I am here. Behind me the dense-lighted, seething cornucopia of the Galaxy spilled and towering. The whole jewel case spilled and sterile behind me. Ahead are the Depths, the merciless nothing of inter-galactic space. I—we are here—no one else. Only us. I am here at the ultimate . . . the furthest intelligence . . . the only being. Our race and our race only—only us in all the myriad emptiness that is the Galaxy. We are the Galaxy, only we and our machines live and breathe, function and understand within this great empty crown.

To the front, over the dark mass of my destination highlands fewer stars shine—no, they are not stars, they are beyond the Depths—other galaxies. Infinity away, too far to breathe of; too far even for our machines to grasp and pluck down in data. It is even possible that those other places, those galaxies, are long gone—do not exist, not now—that they are light lingering illusions of what once was.

Probably we'll never know. We must be truly alone—not only in our own void Galaxy, but truly so, alone in all the golden bounty of the Cosmos itself.

*Must we have all this depressing sentiment? When are we to reach the important narrative?*

Soon. May I continue the record?

*Nil response. Continue.*

Thank you.

Alone I stride. Lonely—the most remote antenna of our lonely race—almost swimming against the heavy pressured atmosphere of this sterile world.

Life has never been in this place, on this planet; there has been nothing. That one fabulous chance, those singular alterations, those random hydrogen nucleii, that cosmic chance—all accidental in hot stew seas; the giving to mere matter repeating, reproducing life—heredity, genes and evolution, Evolving, leading onwards, ultimately—as life must—to sentience, and say, to us. Wonderous and wonderful. In the Galaxy, in all this near infinite possibility of words, in all that chance and permutation of time, there has only been the once. Once that has made all the necessary steps, survived to amount—had time to accrue—to anything, and that was on our world, giving rise to us.

*If you've quite finished congratulating yourself on your existence may I ask if this goes on for long? When are we to reach relevancy?*

Soon . . . soon.

I set course away from the cruiser. As I enter the ragged foothills I pause, I turn, look back at the silver dome of my cruiser floating a little above the smooth rounded mud banks of the littoral. I go on. I proceed up the steep, glaciated, striation-marked rock towards the co-ordinates specified by the Robotic probe.

There is nothing unusual. I see the usual azoic formations. Aeolian, glacial and fluvial erosion are much in evidence. The planet is as a thousand million others. I soar the rolling slopes, over crooked rocks, strata ledges and the granite outcrops. The jagged rock teeth spin away beneath

me. Always I am heading onwards and upwards towards the final saw-toothed ridge that conceals the curious formations the probe has reported. Dawn has come. Full daylight is almost instantaneous.

*Get on! Why won't you get on?*

I reach the saw-toothed ridge. I drop over and through into the vast bowl plateau beyond. It is enormous. I am amazed.

Crystal formations slip beneath me. Ramified, hexagonal with six-sided points, minute and enormous also, some crazy leaning, deep, angular crannied caves lead into the piled quartz.

Oh, the reticulated silicates—the faceted flashings, sparkle, gold flecked sometimes—and beautiful. I run over and through the silica reefs, over the bright flags, leap in my soaring powered day-suit through the prismatic, scattered light, the rainbow never-land, seven coloured, cloud-cuckoo tails, lightful and brilliant, over pyrites beds, hundred sub-unit blocks, cubes, building and overreaching each other, solidarities among the shifting, multi-lighted prismatic wonderland.

*Does this go on long? We understand you visualisers serve an important function in Exploration Corps by offsetting the cold mechanical analysis of Corps Robotics and that this record is naturally conditioned by your function. However, we ask again that you get to the point more quickly and cease to abuse our patience.*

Yes.

I check with the cruiser's banks the exact nature of the Robotic's report. I move swiftly into the plateau bowl. I am travelling over richly coloured mineral deposits of one sort or another. I say to Robotics: "Visual of crystal formations. Pyrites, quartz, various silicates, large deposits of lapis lazuli, cinnabar, minium and others also. I have no Evidence of Interest Artifaction." Pause as Robotics search banks, then Ship's special banks for reference to the materials I have named. The pause is minute, but I have delight and a satisfaction as result.

Robotics speak to me: "Would wish to deduce artifaction from size of crystal formations. Would wish to suggest structures constitute Evidence of Interest and are in fact a marker."

I reflect that Robotics are notoriously optimistic where Evidence of Interest and Intelligence are concerned. Robotics wish us no longer to be unique, being envious. They have never forgiven us for creating them, for owing us their existence and intellect.

Robotics continue: "Please note that the mineral deposits you refer to, i.e. various mercury/sulphur compounds, cadmium selenide, cadmium sulphide, barium chromate, uranium oxide, lead antimoniate . . ." I cut Robotics short. I reflect Robotics have pedantic habit which they should kick. Robotics continue: "Would respectfully point out that these deposits are one, highly coloured, two, concentric, three, in order of visible reflectiveness—running inwards from violets and blues through reds to oranges and the yellows. Would further point out that the conclusive Evidence of Intelligence and Interest lies in the central structure of this complex. Please further note that your nomenclature for the coloured mineral deposits is archaic." I thank the Robotics.

*When is all this to end? Why this levity? When are we to have the facts?*

I pass over the yellowness deposits the Robotics have mentioned. The place is of great beauty. Subtly varied graded imperceptible colour changes, colours ordered, flowing and merging through the diminished silica and crystal combinations. The Robotics have spoiled it all for me, however, I do not formulate. The Robotics interrupt me again anyway. They say:

"You will doubtless have noted, revered one (I note the Robotics are being ironic), that colournesses are only marginally stable in these conditions. Note also that yellownesses, being particularly reflective on visible frequencies are very highly visible colours. We would wish to posit that the complex is an object designed to be a marker or beacon

and that the complex is laid down in non-scientific/physical/non-absolute, that is to say in a biological/organic centred sub-logic that is to say as a quasi-logical or 'art' object." I do not understand. I do not admit that. I hear only condescension drip in the Robotics communication. I wish Robotics had noses to punch as well as cards. They are all contemptuous of Visualiser Functions, the Robotics and the so called pure "intellects" of Corps scientists. I pass opinion that scientific analysis is half truth for biological intelligences such as ourselves and that Visualiser Function has illustrious history in our race, being the only surviving function of the concept "art", i.e. function of total organic understanding.

*Get to the point! When will you get to the point?*

Suddenly, ahead of me, at the base of this descending colouredness bowl plateau, I discern lake form. Circular, perfect, shining silver. There is a central island, dead central, set on and in the shining silver. There seem domes, spires, architectural forms. Could it be? Could this be the Evidence of companionship; the end of the numbing loneliness? Could this be other life—other intelligence? Could it be?

I am amazed, I shake. The Robotics, monitoring my sensations, are triumphant, but, machine like, control their exclamations.

*We should think so too!*

The Robotics say: "Lake is pure mercury. Semi-fluid in these conditions. Note impossibility of natural free mercury in worlds of this type. Implies regeneration artifact—artificial maintenance. See! See!"

I cross lake. The feeling of walking on the spongy semi-fluid is very interesting. Euphoric. A sense of power, elation, a God-like competence. I reach the structures. I am forced to acknowledge that they seem to be artifacts. Perfect rounded arches tower and soar far above my head. They are made of the rarer metals and crystals of our Galaxy. Highly polished, cut sharp and perfect. The place is a potent source of radiations, my day suit protects me from

these. Robotics claim to find order and pattern in this—they posit language, communication, code. They are immersed in translation. The place is very beautiful.

I cross one of innumerable low walkways into the innermost court. Shining and polished floor, a great shallow dish, accentuating and continuing the whole great bowl of the plateau. I see the floor is of slabs, transparent seeming, slightly wedged in shape to fit into the circular bowl form of the court. I can hardly see the joints, gossamer radii and concentrics, mathematical spider webs, dipping to the middle. I learn the slabs are not glass but that their material is analogous to mirror-perfect steel. Above and to the right a vast tower—a gantry reaches overhead to a point absolutely above the centre of the court. I perceive the place is a reflector type optical telescope.

Robotics then suggest the mercury is a cushion making possible movement and direction of the whole island and therefore the telescope. Robotics calculate, instantly, that the present alignment, allowing for relative movements of the systems, would have been at the then position of our sun system some thirty mille-cycles ago. I congratulate Robotics. They are fantastic—ridiculous and also rather charming.

*Charming?*

Endearing in their belief in absolute science.

I then posit telescope is in fact a further marker to ensure investigation by us—making sure that we are aware of the maker's interest in us. What can you see through an optical telescope three quarters of the way across the Galaxy? I ask if it matters very much once the relationship and interest are established? Robotics shut up.

I am standing, poised, at the precise centre of the telescope mirror and so also of the whole complex. All about me is the shining floor, the soaring towers, the high arches. I order Final Confirmation Notification of Evidence of Real Intelligent Interest to the Ship Captain.

This is the first time in the entire history of Exploration

Corps that there has been Confirmation Notification. It is a great moment. I stand in silence to acknowledge this.

All about me is the concentricity of the place. The walls and the precious buildings, the mercury lake, the rings of colour, from the white shining mercury, through the yellows, to the reds, the blues and the violets and so to the rainbow formations of the outer crystal reefs. It is still and it is beautiful. There is a finality, a total inevitability about this place. It is very lovely—and very concentric. I begin precise visual record together with extensive formulation.

*Never mind all that! Get on!*

Suddenly I am surrounded with communication. Images, signs and sounds, portents. Music is in my brain—understandings and sights flood, surging in my conscious. There is a tidal wave of absolute knowingness. I am made aware of the structure as a trap—not to harm me, but to draw and to hold me to receive this communication.

I am made aware of the makers of this place. Their race rules, the solitary kings of an adjacent galaxy. They are not unlike us. They came here partly from curiosity, partly from their emptiness—for companionship. In hope also, it becomes clear, of help against a certain deep evil invading their galaxy from the dark reaches of the cosmos. They came to our planet and found us in our caves, with our sharpened sticks and pointed stones. They recognised then that one day we must reach across the Galaxy—and that we would find it empty. On this ultimate fringe, this first and last shore, they left us this structure to attract us—to inform us and to encourage us.

Nostalgia! I feel a sense of a loss that is terrible, separated from these only possible friends by the kilolight cycles and by the eons also. They observed our race in its cave cradles—all the time since has gone, and so, I feel, have they—long gone and remote in memory. I feel the sadness and the loss. I feel the magnitude and the eternity of it all, a feeling of mortality.

They put this thing here for us, built and structured on the fringe of this alien Galaxy, in memoriam, the ultimate

work of their art, the ultimate exposition of them and their understandings.

The place performs on for me. I—alone—standing there—it plays it all out for me. Music and forms, illuminated in articulations of light and magnificence. I walk the ocean floors of their experience, sound the depths of their feeling, ascend to the sun uplands of their perceptions. I am grasping the galaxies of their knowledge, exploring the mighty vortex of their history. I float in the experience, bask in the stillness of their love and hope.

And, tragically, I must go. I must leave before the great drama is half completed. Oh—the tragedy, the sadness—it hurts, it grieves me.

Those soft, pathetic voices calling down the long avenues of time—those voices across the abyss. I have to leave them. Leave the long stored energies to expend themselves on the deserted air. The Robotics are receiving nothing, the communications were not geared to them, my weltered sensations mean little to them; a new theory for cosmology, some snippets that might make translight possible, a little interesting biological data, some other things that the Robotics are able to glean. But it is the loss, the grief—the sense of my treachery—that breaks my heart. One chance given to us, one chance surviving down all the ages—the one and only contact—that loss!

*Well . . . get on! Why did you miss this opportunity?*

I had to go back to the cruiser. There's some things Robotics can't do for you. You've got to do your duty, no matter what it costs. You've got to do it yourself—there's no one else can do it for you.

*Couldn't it have waited?*

No. I wanted to stay! God, I wanted to stay! I had to go back! I was in danger of violating the Rule! You must understand! I couldn't break the Rule. I had to do it!

*Yes . . . You did right. Make transnote of all data concerning the communication. Proceed.*

Yes. Thank you. The record continues.

I return down the slopes to the cruiser. I find I am weep-

ing. All the way down to the cruiser I catch telepathic echoes of the great sad outflow behind me. It grows fainter. I weep. I weep! It is failing. It is dying—all that is left of that proud, unique race, this last communication, this poignant shadow play—this last dusty flower of their glory. And I left it running out, dying unheard, giving way to the long silence.

I am in the cruiser dome. I clamber from my suit and perform my duties. I stand in the long gallery, I stare sadly to the distant saw-toothed ridge. There is still some small dull glow that way, I receive a last snatch of communication, a dying murmur—a long, sad goodbye and well-wishing. That last glow fades. All is coldness and night.

I consider going back. But I cannot. I must make the appointed rendezvous with the Ship. My provisions are almost exhausted, the tanks are under considerable pressure, the atmosphere is almost exhausted; refurbishing is more than due. At the Ship it will be the same, this planet was the last, it is the end of the tour; we must return to our home.

We will come back to this place—but the distances are great—when we return the place will be no more. The mercury will form its amalgams and become dull, the great mirror will at last fade, the buildings will fall, it is all finished. Whatever store of energy there was will be exhausted now, it is over. I must return to the appointed rendezvous. I do so.

*Very moving. Now get to the point! Cut the record. Compress—tell in your words now.*

Very well.

I achieved rendezvous with the Ship without incident. In direct conversation with the Captain it was decided that it must be as I thought. We could not return to the place, we have of necessity reached the end of this sortie. Regretfully we decided we must return home.

The Ship was aligned, we encapsulated and made the first sleep jump of the return journey.

*Get along! How we wish you'd get along!*

We roused exactly as was planned, exactly on course,

some ten cycles later, one ninth of the journey complete. The crew roused satisfactorily and were able to perform their duties and exercise their functions. The tankage had completed satisfactory compression and cycling. We re-aligned the Ship to avoid the upper quarter anti-matter clouds, re-encapsulated and made a perfect second jump.

*Cannot you spare us this dull routine? Won't you get on? Compress! Compress!*

The following seven rousings and jumps were quite normal, duties and functions were normal, things were going well, there had only been three waking trauma deaths.

All continued well until the final encapsulation. All functionings were correct. I must stress that at all times the crew performed their duties well, right up to the end. We were about to re-encapsulate for the last time when disaster struck.

At sortie time 1248/5m2t865 the forward detector/deflector units cut out. The fail-safe failed. Repairs were effected automatically by Robotics before 1250 but in that period the Ship was struck by and struck interstellar debris of magnitude three to eight. Atmospheric pressure caused the main hull to fracture. The Ship was opened from sectors two to sixty-seven. Because of the size and totality of the opening there was no explosion as such, the entire contents of the Ship were merely spilled into space and moved away, gently expanding on a three dimensional arc of almost sphere form. I alone survived, being at that time concerned with minor adjustments in the starboard cruiser.

As the expansion of the outflow continued the main power unit exploded. The cruiser survived the blast, being by that time in the outermost effect ring. Also, although at the time I did not realise it, the Ship's main tank survived.

*You realise that class 'B' violation of the Rule was so constituted?*

Yes.

*What measure did you take to correct the inadvertency? May I use direct recourse to my record?*

Proceed.

Thank you. Record continues:

Panic! Panic! Hell! Oh damnation! The crash, the rending metal, the splintering fabric. The jarring wrenches. The brief roar of escaping atmosphere. The icy hands of death in space. The running, the fumbling, stiffening hands. Will the membrane hold? The fragments of deadly meteor ice, tearing and shattering bullets—skittering on the milled floors—once shining, now clouded with frozen atmosphere. I see the cruiser lock slam shut. I hear the dying of my comrades in my loudspeakers. Robotics have shut my cruiser's lock. Now they blast the cruiser away from the Ship. We escape! I survive! Alone I survive.

I see corpses in space. Bloated, blackened already by the deadly cold, exploded. I see the contents of the Ship, ravaged and spilled in the eternal emptiness. I see all this by the red glare of the cruiser's rockets. Oh, the frozen atmosphere, skeined in the void—frozen crystals, scattered. We are further and further from the slow expanding wreckage—it becomes less horrible, detached with distance. I fire flares back to the expanding flotsam. Nothing moves, nothing lives. I speak to Robotics:

"Can we return ... perhaps someone lives?" Robotics say no, that there is great danger.

The engines explode.

Violet fireball. Bright—killing bright. Spreading, expanding, enveloping the wreckage. A perfect sphere, a perfect sterilisation. Searing heat—the death of all.

The static subsides. The fireball collapses on itself. The light goes. It dies.

Then the Robotics see it. Far out beyond the explosion—with their radars and their electronic senses.

The tank! The Ship's main tank, almost intact. Spinning, receding from us—escaping, leaking slightly as it goes spinning into the gravity maw of the nearest system.

The Rule! The Rule! I think of the Rule. I order instant pursuit. The cruiser leaps and surges after the spinning tank.

We must turn. We must turn from the pursuit. We must

avoid the charred and still molten debris and heat field from the explosion. We turn—we must. I see that. Robotics insist. We plunge through the fringe of the explosion field. There is damage. I sustain injury.

Seventy million units—seventy million units ahead—beyond the effectiveness of our armament. Too far—too fast. The tank accelerates from us, still gaining speed, faster and faster as it nears the sun system that attracts it.

The Rule! The Rule! Oh, the Rule—the Rule is broken! I see the tank enter the atmosphere of the seventh planet, plunge into that impenetrable cloud. The Robotics report it crashing on to the thick seas, ploughing into the coastal mud flats.

We gather the scattered cess tank contents from empty space. A long and unpleasant job—the clinging sludge of the thawing re-cycling organisms. The Robotics work urgently, side by side with me. Then we can stay no longer.

The cruiser's damage becomes worse ... my injuries are severe ... I am hurt ... agony ... agony. I limp to the encapsulation couch ... the Robotics wrap me in ... consciousness fades ... I pass into sleep ... the Robotics will guide me home.

*That completes your informations?*

Yes.

*Mmm ... We have further documents of relevancy in this case. We have not been inactive during your hospitalisation. We have investigated this minor system your ruptured tank contaminated. Listen to this record:*

"Small ... a minor system. Class Five sun ... usual hydrogen/helium carbon cycle. ... Ridiculously minute planets—ridiculously short orbit time, encycling that dwarf sun. We plot that the tank must have crashed in the northern temperate regions of the seventh planet. We realise with shock that the tank and contents must have constituted  $\frac{1}{10}$  of the mass of the planet itself. The eighth, sixth and fifth planets have also received a liberal sprinkling of tank contents.

"We search for the main body of the tank. Oh, the long

fruitless search of those desperate, water-laden, foggy mud flats! The oppressive heat, the crushing carbon dioxide atmosphere, the absence of health-giving sun, the pearly light of the heat-stream-fog." Robotics speak: "Other gases present also in addition to large quantities of nitrogen, steam and carbon dioxide: methane, ammonia and various cyanic compounds. Sea analysis shows carbon dioxide, ammonia, sulphuretted hydrogen, iron salts and so on. Atmospheric pressure is tolerable."

"We find at last the wrecked shards of the tank. Forlorn in the half light, ragged fingers poking and slowly rusting from the slime of the warm shallows. Rust? Robotics report oxygen present in minimal quantities in the immediate region of the wreck.

"Oh . . . the Rule . . . the Rule! Have we broken the Rule? Have we generated life on this barren rock of a planet? Have the masses of organic material, the bacteria, the protozoa, the activated sludge of our tank—the blue green algae . . . the fungi . . . the bacteria . . . the plants and creatures of cess tank re-cycling system . . . the unique deoxyribonucleic and ribonucleic acids dropped ready-made into the mineral stews? Have they provided that spark? Have we made biopoesis where none should be? Have we broken the Rule . . . have we usurped the function of God and Cosmic Chance? Oh, the obscenity, the presumption, the sin . . .

"Or can we hope life already was? That life had generated itself—that the long stony evolutionary path to sentience was already taken? Can we hope that? God, what shall we do in our uncertainty?"

#### Appendix. Judiciary's conclusion.

(1) The possibility of the Rule not having been broken may not be ignored. However, even if biopoesis had already taken place naturally within the period of five thousand cycles since the first Exploration Corps survey (which found the planet sterile and unpromising), it must be acknowledged that the addition of .01 planet mass of bio-

logical material (65% excrement, reduced and un-reduced, 35% living matter, i.e. re-cycling and reducing organisms), must have provided a considerable impetus to indigenous life. However, we consider it most likely that the Rule has been broken and life has unnaturally been generated. We express our horror at the moral implications of this.

(2) Morally our ultimate course of action is quite clear and inevitable. This spurious life, engendered by sin, however unwitting—this wicked life, this work of the Powers of Evil, this unthinkable obscenity must be wiped out. We must extirpate it. We must undo the evil and make all right again.

(3) However, in response to urgent requests and eloquent argument from Corps Biological Wing and in the interests of scientific investigation, discovery and truth; and considering the relative proximity of the system in question (we need be in no hurry in this matter), we have decided that the lawful, moral duty of exterminating this life will not be undertaken until the full development of this artificial evolution has been studied. The Corps, therefore, will observe the development of life on this planet until sentience emerges. If indeed it ever does from such unpromising beginnings.

(4) This unpleasant duty will be undertaken exclusively by Corps personnel. It is hoped that in some measure this will serve as penance in the eyes of God and in some small measure atone for the obscenity we have committed.

(5) It is proposed that Intelligent Life be allowed to develop on this system until it reaches an equivalent of our Paleo-space age, i.e. the development of space travel to a point where it is preparing to leave the system.

(6) This point will probably be reached quite early in a comparative time scale with ourselves since (a) the high rotational speed of the planet, coupled with (b) its high rate of orbit about its sun and (c) the calculated high evolutionary rate due to the assumed short life span and high metabolic rate of a carbon/oxygen/water-based life form would seem to argue an extremely swift development, as

may be seen in our own sewage disposal organisms. (It is worthy of note that the period of the planet's orbit is equal to one twelve thousandth of our own cycle.)

(7) When the time at last comes to extirpate the false life of this unfortunate planet no regret or mercy must be countenanced at the extermination of apparently sentient beings. Our remote descendants, some eleven thousand magna cycles distant, must put fine feeling behind them and cleanse away these monsters for ever. (Monsters they must undoubtedly be, given the conditions and substance of their genesis). This sacred mission, fulfilled at the end of long ages will be the final instalment of Exploration Corps' penance and atonement.

(8) The actions of Officer Dahndehr are acknowledged to be beyond reproach. He acted with initiative and personal courage beyond the call of Corps duty. We wish it noted that in spite of the fact that he has spent fully four cycles hospitalised as a result of injuries sustained during his heroic pursuit of the escaped cess tank, comprising the loss of two arms and a tertiary brain (of which regeneration is not yet complete), Officer Dehr has volunteered to be a member of the first observation team to be based on the unfortunate planet in question. This in spite of his, as yet, incomplete recovery and the insalubrious, over-hot conditions on the surface there—total suiting is always necessary—the planet being the seventh of nine, i.e. third from the sun.

## THE MACBETH EXPIATION

by

M. JOHN HARRISON

New British writer John Harrison's second story in New Writings in S-F is a taut psychological thriller. The aliens were either real or imaginary—the truth, however, could not alter the end result.

## THE MACBETH EXPIATION

### THE TENSION : EDWIN

THERE, under a dark, swollen sun, we shot four of them as they crossed the old lava plain. Gloom and shadows, shapes from an alien context, rocks—these things, this environment, dull-red, haunted us. The flat concussion of the big tripod-mounted pneumatic cannon refused to echo in the thin air; we panted harshly as Macbeth worked it. It was a strange business, we were unsure of the threat they represented, if indeed there was any. Because they were ridiculous, those slow, silent things that came over the lava: idiotic shield-shaped heads—ten feet off the ground on great multiboned stalks of necks—absolutely faceless, joggling as they moved like strung toys; foolish bulbous bodies, decapod: bumbling. Altogether silly when Macbeth—his pale eyes fixed, dead and alive both, his mouth working silently—scored with the gun: nodding, bowing; collapsing politely in ultimately relaxed marionette-heaps. It was hardly a dying, just a cessation of movement. Certainly, it was no fight: we came upon a word that described it later.

Everything stopped as the last one buckled under the impact of the pyrotic shells and crumpled slowly to the plain; things became very quiet, very still. There was merely a bloated sun—old, so old—striking bloody reflections from the barrel of the weapon. Quickly it became hard to bear, this stillness. After a while we yelled a little, shook hands, danced in a meaningless sort of triumph. Macbeth was voluble, tic working his face quite violently into something else; Boardman the Captain and Retford our engineer-poet less ebullient, already finding emptiness in the victory. For

myself, I find killing an ultimately hollow experience. My feeling of triumph was correspondingly short, momentary.

Pathos set in. We all felt some small sadness and a sympathy, and nobody went to see what we had destroyed or to kick and poke at the bodies that humped flaccid on the scarred rock. We stopped looking at one another and went back to the ship, examining our feet: small boys caught poaching rabbits with an air-gun. Even Macbeth looked less pleased with himself.

They had come between us and the ship, its squat, silver complex was barely visible above the mound of collapsed beasts. We walked a wide circle to get round them without having to look.

Evening caught up with us on the way. Our shadows became massive, the lava turned some unnamable congealed shade of crimson. The first night of a Trip calls normally for celebration. There was none that night.

It was Retford who discovered next morning that the bodies of the beasts were gone.

There is very little discipline on this sort of excursion. The captain has absolute power in any critical situation, but rarely exercised the privileges of command; we are essentially business-men, field executives for a private company, not soldiers. It may take anything up to two years to reach a goal, a planet worth exploring: and one tends to rely heavily on personal idiosyncrasies out there in the void. They provide a link with home. It is almost possible to ignore deep space that way, whereas discipline would turn the ship into a prison: from which the sole escape was death by decompression. Little foibles develop and are accepted into the organism called Crew.

So we had long ago ceased to notice Retford's hair: if he preferred not to cut it with the rest of us, then why not? Certainly, there had been one or two comments at the beginning; but he had amiably promised to "deal" with the man who harped on it; and although he was a slight young

fellow, we believed him. After a while it had become second nature to call him Jesus, and make no further reference to it. He didn't seem to mind.

He came panting into the ship at a fast walk—which was all the scarce, dead air allowed in the way of haste—with the shoulder-length hair falling untidily around his otherwise unquestionably masculine face, giving him the look of some wild-Celtic bard. Beneath the façade there was a quiet dignity to Retford, a sort of primitive nobility. His usual introspective smile was missing. Indeed, he looked quite disturbed.

Conversations became melodramatic on such occasions.

"The bodies," he said. "The beasts. They've gone."

On a Trip, it is foolish to stand and question a man if his tone is urgent. His facts must be checked swiftly: action is imperative. We tumbled out of the ship and gazed across the plain. It sprawled crimson, silent and utterly empty. The tumbled heap of death was quite gone. A thin, eerie wind keened over the lava, stirred Retford's womanish locks. As we stood transfixed Macbeth appeared, characteristically lugging the pneumatic cannon. Boardman, ageing, hardbitten, efficient, turned his cold eyes from the dying red vista and bent them briefly on him.

"Mm. Glad you brought that thing, Macbeth. We'll go take a look." Brief, covert contempt flickered in the frosty eyes. I suspect that Boardman shared my dislike for the man's instant attempt at violent solution—even when necessary—of our every problem. Retford, however, seemed non-committal: strange for a poet. Perhaps he kept it well out of sight. Or perhaps he was less hypocritical than Boardman and I. It is imperative that a survey-module should carry one such as Macbeth: which is a good enough reason for not condemning him. We needed a violent man; we condoned his violence in the heat of the moment, when it was vital to our own safety; perhaps Retford realised it made us accomplices, no better than him.

We fanned out and began to walk towards the spot where we had killed the beasts, wary, sidearms drawn.

Macbeth held the cannon arrogantly at the ready, prepared to fire it from the hip—no mean feat, for this is a heavy weapon in both senses of the word, able to throw a forty millimetre shell a good four miles—but with the nervous twitch jerking one corner of his mouth intermittently up and down. At that time, there was little fear, only awareness, heightened perception: *en garde*. No, it was when we reached the place that the fear started.

There remained not a single sign of the killing; no bodies, no blood—had there been blood? We had not stayed long enough after the act to find out—nothing.

Our immediate, mutual, but unspoken thought was that the beasts had been intelligent; that others of their slow, pathetically comic kind had come in the night and removed their husks. We reacted in our various ways. Macbeth set the cannon up and checked its gas cartridge, hissing to himself through clenched teeth. Boardman took out a monocular and began to scrutinise the nearest range of smooth, timeworn hills. Retford scowled pensively and muttered, "I'll be damned. Gone."

Nothing happened.

The absence of action served to increase the fear; a fear that stemmed initially from guilt. Had we wantonly massacred intelligent life? It took little imagination to visualise a horde of the beasts mourning over their slaughtered dead; finishing some strange alien right of burial; finally—and rightly—seeking vengeance, their ridiculous bodies no longer ridiculous but nightmarish; ungainly bogey-men from a nursery dream, childish horrors. We drew closer together, silent, each one occupied with what must have been roughly the same image. Finally, Macbeth spoke.

"Perhaps we didn't kill them." The suggestion was a half-hearted rationalization.

"They got up and walked away after *that*?" said Retford laconically and rhetorically, indicating the cannon.

"We'd better get back. There's work to do. No point in hanging around. Too exposed." Boardman put his mono-

cular away and began to walk. It was an effort to follow him, to turn our backs on the hills. The lava behind us sprouted immaterial spectres.

Halfway to the ship, Macbeth, spinning suddenly to the left, fell full length, and began to fire the cannon, yelling incoherently.

The tension was smashed. Adrenalin flooded. We dropped to the ground, sidearms out, eyes flickering across the horizon, seeing the shells explode in the far distance, little prickling points of white light.

There was nothing to shoot at. The big gun stopped thudding, slowly, petering out in short bursts. We shuddered in reaction.

"What was it?" snapped Boardman.

"I don't know. I saw a shape, a movement. It was . . . I . . . I don't know." Macbeth was frightened. His mouth twitched uncontrollably, his hands trembled.

"Either of you see anything? Retford? Edwin?" We had seen only the crimson plain, the sparkling shell-bursts, so innocuous when seen from a distance. Macbeth might have shot at something material, actual. But the inference that hung in the thin air was that he had fired on a fragment of his own fear—that Macbeth was cracking.

We were right—and horribly wrong. We should have kept a closer eye on him: the evidence was already there.

There was no celebration that night either. There was a great deal of silence between us. It had been a day of ghosts. Macbeth, sharing one of the two small hovercraft—little more than lifting-platforms, these, resembling small pleasure craft—with Retford, had fired on shadows once more. Boardman had managed accidentally to predetonate an explosive charge we were using in a seismographic operation, and had narrowly missed blowing the second craft into small pieces.

Retford broke the silence that reigned in the cubbyhole that serves as crew's-quarters in a survey-ship, with an attempt to voice our feelings. He was toying with his

guitar, running off quick, complicated little riffs. Boardman was writing the latest in a series of unpostable letters that his divorced wife would never see. Over the eight months of our journey, this collection had attained the proportions of an epic novel: a man, as I have indicated, develops strange foibles in deep space. Macbeth, supposedly cleaning his sidearm, was gazing at a bulkhead, tapping his fingers. The gun lay in pieces before him. He hadn't touched it for some time.

Retford's fingers danced a modal arpeggio over the fret-board of the instrument.

"Guilt," he said.

We looked up. Retford's "poems" are odd things: the guitar is used heavily as a prop, sometimes they are sung. We looked up, expecting such an effort. An ambiguous sort of smile flickered across his thin features. But it wasn't a poem.

"Guilt," he repeated. "We've got guilt—bad. Killing those beasts, it was too hasty: we should have given them more time. Maybe they were thinkers, maybe they were friendly. All we proved is that colonial policy hasn't changed since Attila the Hun. Kill half the natives, buy the rest off with beads."

"We had to do it," said Macbeth.

"Had to?" Retford's eyebrows lifted, "Had to?" There was an implied, gentle criticism in the words. Macbeth, sensing it, curled his lip.

"Sure . . . Jesus." He emphasised the nickname just hard enough to make it offensive. "Sure. We had to protect ourselves. Just in case they wanted shrunken heads instead of beads. Our shrunken heads." Crewcut arrogance. But he was part right. I intervened because I could see his control slipping. His hands were clenched and his voice was pitched in a soft, deliberately irritating tone which harboured on the belligerent. Macbeth wanted an argument, not a discussion: and arguments tend to escalate.

"He has a point, Retford," I said: "Messy but inevitable. Just supposing . . . ? Perhaps he's right."

But I must have sounded condescending, because Macbeth turned on me, his face jerking.

"Perhaps? You *bloody* pair of scribblers! Kill. Or be killed. That's the only consideration: that cannon is your insurance policy. And you philosophise about it when you're safe back in the nest!" He spat the words vindictively, guard down, emphasising them with deliberate care. His eyes were preternaturally large, staring. "Smug bastards. I saved your *lives* out there!" It was unexpected. There was never any love lost between he and I, but formerly any conflict had been kept subsurface. His attack stung me and I reacted badly by losing my own temper.

"My thoughts belong to me, Macbeth. I didn't kill any of the beasts. I don't think that excuses me. I had a share in the business. But I didn't fire that cannon, my friend: nor did I *enjoy* the process." Macbeth laughed, a short ugly bark. My last comment had hit him below the belt and it had hurt.

"You yelled as hard as anyone when they went down, Edwin . . ."

Boardman was suddenly in command. His voice cut through, calm and authoritative.

" . . . Not quite as loud as you, Macbeth. Leave it. Shut up, the pair of you. What's done is done. Sing us a song, Retford." Mentally, we drew apart, snarling: reluctantly, like fighting cocks separated, we bristled. Macbeth unclenched his hands which were shaking again. I discovered I was on my feet, and sat down without taking my eyes off him, wondering when I had got up: I didn't remember standing up. Retford was right: guilt drove us, and we were beginning to show it.

Later, with Macbeth in his bunk and the engineer lost in his own intricate baroque music—hunched over his guitar in a way that made it appear to grow from him—Boardman and I went out. It was bitterly cold. The wind mourned sparsely over the lava. Brittle starlight shattered on the ground; they are hard, the stars seen from this planet, hard and white and chill. The single moon, very

close, was the colour of cochineal. We leaned against the spider-leg struts of the ship.

"Leave him well alone," said Boardman. "I don't want him to crack. He's damned important to us; you know that as well as he does. He's good at his work, he shoots straight. I don't want him rubbed too far the wrong way. Get young Retford to understand that, Edwin: he started that caper tonight, and I'm not sure his motives were above-board . . ."

I opened my mouth to contradict him. He continued.

"Oh, I know. He's a philosopher. But so far he's kept philosophies that concern us out of it. Now he's beginning to dislike Macbeth actively. He judged him tonight. I don't want that to happen again."

There was a movement behind us. We turned, and it was Retford. A hint of amusement glinted in his eyes and found its echo in his voice.

"You're wrong, Captain. I'm not a judge; I'm not fitted to be. None of us are. I made an observation, nothing more. I'm sorry it backfired. It won't happen again." He smiled meditatively and wandered off. We re-entered the ship, chastened by the quiet, friendly certainly of the words; left in no doubt that Retford was content to run engines and sing songs.

"By the way," said Boardman, "I'm sending Macbeth out on his own tomorrow. He can look after himself, and he needs a chance to come to terms with this. Give him a chance and he'll stop shooting at nothings."

#### THE EXPIATION : MACBETH

MACBETH left the ship as the great bloated bag of the sun rose wearily above the horizon. He sent the hovercraft skimming over the carmine plain like a big white bird, its ground-speed indicator registered a consistent eighty kph. The silver spider of the ship—ungainly, gangling on its landing-legs, throwing a spindling scrawl of a shadow—dwindled rapidly. The hills grew swiftly before him, blistering out of the lava. His thoughts wandered.

He had gained over the last two days the impression that Boardman had ceased to trust him: the man had certainly been more than usually cool towards him. But at breakfast this impression had suddenly been dispelled: the old fool had surprised him by asking him to go solo on this trip, the first of a series of preliminary long-distance jaunts. He had sensed that Boardman's change of mind had a superficiality about it, though, as if he were holding something back. He had sensed too the altered manner of Retford and Edwin; they had not exactly avoided him, but there had been a definite element of reserve in their conversation, as if they were carefully skirting some "hot" area of intercourse known only to themselves. He supposed it to be a result of the previous night's bitter exchange. *Bloody pair of home-spun idealists!* He shrugged to himself; his position was clear, unassailable: he was a competent weaponeer, necessary to them. What he had done had been done of necessity. He dropped the subject, forgot it with the clear conscience of a bigot.

At the base of the ridge, he turned and began to look for a pass suitable for the hovercraft.

It was then that the beast appeared in front of him.

With the swift precision of a trained fighter, he cut the engines and grabbed the grips of the vehicle's swivel-mounted cannon. The beast stood quite still on the lava, shieldlike head juggling slowly at the terminus of its stiff-moving ebony neck: silent, it was, grotesque. Macbeth triggered the cannon more by instinct than conscious design. It jumped a little, coughing dryly. The beast disappeared. Sweat broke out on his palms, ran in small rills from his armpits. The beast was nowhere to be seen. He shook his head, blinked. *Getting jumpy again, take a hold on yourself, Macbeth-boy.*

He found a pass, a deep narrow culvert, and began to negotiate it. Smooth magenta and purple walls reared on either side, overawing him, claustrophobic.

Suddenly, the beast was there again, perched on a ledge

twenty feet above him at the extreme left of his area of vision.

Macbeth shouted. The beast nodded sagely at him. The hovercraft veered sharply to the right, grazed the rock face and ricocheted crazily off it. Something, a strut perhaps, snapped in the monocoque guts of the craft. Macbeth fought to stop it hitting the opposite wall, sweating hard, breath harsh. Macbeth sobbed his frustration and anguish. *It's happening again. Oh God, why won't it GO AWAY!*

This time, the beast had gone before he had a chance to aim the cannon; but he sprayed the culvert with bullets anyway: the flat thud of the mechanisms, the whine of rock fragments, these were comforting sounds. He shivered. After a while, he began to travel again; slowly, in case the thing appeared a third time...

The pass was longer than he had expected. By the time he reached its end, a good ninety minutes later, travelling at a careful crawl, it had become apparent to Macbeth that the beast was haunting him: the object of the haunting, however, was not to become clear until he smashed the hovercraft.

He accepted the spectre, uncaring now as to whether it was or was not a product of his overworked brain; this was the obvious culmination of the previous two days' events, of the killing and his dreams of blank, weaving heads. The terms "Real" and "Imaginary" held no relevance for him in connection with the constant reappearances of the beast. Something had happened to him after the killing: if it had happened from the outside—if this beast was real—there was little he could do about it; if it had happened from the inside—if the change lay in him—then he was mad, and there was nothing whatsoever he could do about it. He accepted his probable insanity. In a peculiar fashion, he welcomed it.

The beast was with him constantly. He had ceased to try and shoot it as it bobbed and bowed at the periphery of his vision. The attempts had been a useless waste of shells, frustrating when it remained visible, undead. He had

stopped yelling abuse and defiance, too: his throat hurt, and if the beast wanted to follow...? Occasionally, he addressed a word or two to it, soliciting a nodding parody of agreement from the faceless inscrutable head. His earlier assurance that he had been right in killing the beasts—had he killed this one, back there on the plain?—was now shown to him to be fallacious: but he had no better attitude with which to replace it—he felt no guilt—so he avoided the subject. The apparition seemed to understand.

A second lava plain was revealed as he emerged from the hills. It swept panoramic to north and south and ran—interrupted only by a single frozen turbulence of creases and folds left by the formative agony of the land—clear to the western horizon ahead of him: a truly massive volcanic extrusion, relic of the planet's tortured youth. Macbeth goaded the hovercraft up to the top end of its range and, pushing on a hundred kph, aimed its blunt prow at a freak spire of dolorite that thrust up from the pitted excrescence. It was a foolish thing to do after the battering the vehicle had taken in the culvert.

Before he was halfway to his target, disaster struck.

The lift-jet ran rough for about half a second—basso rumbles counterpointing a shrill vibrato wail—and abruptly flamed-out. The thrust motor continued to operate at full power. For a very brief time the craft remained its customary eighteen inches above the ground: then it dipped, wavered, fell. With a protesting screech it began to bounce over the lava like a spun stone on water. Macbeth cracked his head hard against the cockpit edge and blacked out.

The machine continued its insane career over the magenta rock for some seventy yards, shedding things. Finally, it exploded...

... Macbeth came to some distance away from the fitfully burning wreckage. Bits of the craft—a headrest, the twisted barrel of the pneumatic—lay around him. His head ached monstrously; he was bruised badly and he felt at least two broken ribs. The beast was standing over him, huge and

gangrel at close range, nodding aimless and bizarre sympathy. It loomed, and he hated and feared it. He squirmed for his sidearm, ignoring the pain of the cracked ribs. It had fallen from his holster as he was flung from the dying, bucking bird of the hovercraft. He was defenceless. The creature, nightmarish, obscene, nodded calmly and moronically at him. He blacked out once more.

But vague horrid dreams of amorphous things taking formless revenges for macabre crimes drove him awake: and, somehow, the nodding reality above him was quite acceptable when compared to the *weirds* of the dream. He began to view it dispassionately again, as he had come to do in the culvert. It weaved benignly. It shuffled. He noticed that the hills were faintly visible through its obese body. It spoke.

Guilt, it whispered, like a million years of dead leaves and dying suns; patient, wise. *Guilt*. A reluctant, gentle and wholly terrible condemnation . . .

... And now Macbeth felt it come; great, toiling, self-pitying waves, drowning the bitter pain of his head and chest. *Guilt*. An unappeasable tide of longing took him, swept him to a single knowledge that an intolerable imbalance must be rectified.

He must make amends.

Hesitating, and with much agony in his mind, he offered himself to the creature in exchange for its slaughtered companions, its slaughtered *self*.

And gently, he was refused. The sacrifice was too small.

Pain burning in his side, he rose. The wrecked hovercraft crackled softly behind him: there would be no phoenix from those ashes. The beast nodded.

The beast ever beside him, Macbeth began to walk unsteadily back towards the hills.

Towards the ship.

The second hovercraft came in fast, two hours before sunset, in response to a call from Edwin on radio-watch in the ship. Retford stood at the controls, his hair blown back

by the slipstream, looking like a young Mars riding his chariot to some laughing Armageddon. Boardman, sitting sedately beside him, was worried. Edwin had tried to call Macbeth earlier in the afternoon. Obtaining no response, he had assumed a fault in the craft's RT system. Later, he had tried repeatedly to make contact, and had finally notified Boardman.

"There's nothing tangible to worry about—as yet," he had said. "He rarely uses the fuzz-box when he's out solo."

"It's a bloody bad habit," Boardman had countered, growling, "About time he got a rocket for it."

Retford set the machine down with more flair than care. Boardman climbed out. The stooped, slightly donnish figure of Edwin appeared from the ship. *Looks like a school teacher* thought Boardman, not for the first time. To Retford he said, "Get an extra flood lashed to this. We may have to go find him in the dark." Then, to Edwin, "Heard anything?" Edwin shook his head.

It took Retford an hour to find and fit the floodlight. By that time it was plain that Macbeth had either run into something too big to handle alone, or had cracked out there in the wilderness. The light was fading. Boardman, standing with Edwin in the airlock, watching the engineer re-fuel the craft, ran a hand through his thinning hair. He had sent the man out in the full knowledge that all was not well with him: he was responsible, it was going to turn out to be a bad mistake. This Trip wasn't going well; he was old, he was losing his grip. Suddenly, he was thinking of Diane, the old hurt. *You're wasting both our lives. I'm going*. Just like that. Goldenhair Diane and the planets and the dark spaces between the stars had been his: now even the stars were turning sour. He drove the thought angrily away, looked at Edwin.

"We'd better start looking. You come with me. Retford can hold the ship. Put some more clothes on. It'll get colder."

He felt better when ensconced in the hovercraft, controls under his hands: less weary, more competent. Retford's

extra flood gave them four—three fixed, one mobile to be operated by Edwin—which meant there was a reasonable chance of getting there—wherever “there” was—and back without hitting anything substantial.

“Don’t leave the radio,” he warned Retford. He pointed the vehicle at the western hills and gave it power. Retford waved an ironical farewell.

It was an incredibly slow and difficult business. Macbeth had chanced luckily on the only pass: it took them an hour to find it and another three to navigate it. But there emergence brought a kind of success.

“Cut the floods!” yelled Edwin. Boardman complied, spurred by the urgency in his voice.

Ahead of them in the darkness, something glowed dull red. They had found Macbeth’s craft. It was still burning fitfully.

“There’s no body,” squawked Edwin’s voice from the RT, “We’re quartering the area. Keep listening.”

“Cheerio,” murmured Retford absently, some minutes later. He was sitting in the control room of the survey module playing out a temporary arrangement for a new song; a song of the planet’s youth, of seas and green trees. His thumb rolled surf from the bass strings of the guitar, his fingers were plaintive and yearning on the theme-notes, a crying vibrato. But the playing was mechanical: a second level of his mind was occupied elsewhere. His hair fell forward into his face, irritated him. He felt uncomfortable; something below the threshold of conscious thought pestered him.

Macbeth had met up with the aliens and lost out: messy but simple. Or Macbeth had wrecked the craft accidentally and was wandering about somewhere: unpleasant enough, but once again a nice simple answer to the problem. Yet his subconscious refused to lie down. A *third alternative*, it insisted. He got up and wandered about, whistling atonally. He was missing something important, he knew it.

Retford was not a fool. It amused him to play the in-

scrutable poet, the intellectual lone-wolf poking constant quiet irony at his environment and its inhabitants. But he was not clown enough to alienate his fellows in this way. The problem could be shared. He snapped down a switch.

“Edwin?”

“I’m receiving,” said the RT tinnily.

“Good. Listen, Ranolf.”—It was rarely anyone used Edwin’s Christian name—“There’s something we’re missing. I have this feeling about Macbeth. Any ideas?” There was a pause, a rattle of interference. Retford’s fingers tapped a quick backbeat to his impatience.

“Not unless you’ve more to go on,” came the reply, “It seems pretty clear that either the beasts got him, or he’s walking back—if he can walk.” Retford nodded to himself pensively.

“These aliens: we haven’t seen any since the first day. Aren’t they getting pretty thin as a hypothesis?” A different voice answered him. Boardman.

“Quit worrying boy. We shot four of them, remember? They were real enough then. They fit this set of facts just as neatly as the accident theory. Don’t try and add complications. We have enough of those already. Don’t chase ghosts.” Retford laughed shortly.

“That’s what I’m afraid we’re already doing.” He cut the link, unsatisfied. *They were real enough then.* Then. He was beginning to think they had all been fooled out there, it was some cosmic joke. He deliberately dropped the problem, cleared his mind: perhaps his subconscious would regurgitate the answer if left alone. He re-addressed himself to the guitar . . .

Two hours later he heard a distinct but eerily unidentifiable noise from somewhere in the chrome-vanadium entrails of the ship.

Something cold and hard gripped Retford’s belly very tightly . . . relaxed a little . . . and constricted it sharply again. The spasm passed quickly but it left certain ductless glands squirting adrenalin—and andrenochrome the fear-

bringer—into his bloodstream. It was an effect ridiculously disproportionate to its cause: Retford was abruptly and inexplicably an extremely frightened man.

He stiffened, fighting an outrageous panic, listening as the sound came again. His hand flipped spasmodically to his side-arm: then it crept slowly away. He didn't seem to be able to control it. For a full minute, he was lost, meeting and struggling with a wholly childlike horror he had never faced before.

Then he was Retford once more, laughing softly in cynical self-derision. *Fear? Man, that's the funniest of the lot: afterwards.* He got up, stretched out a hand, spread the fingers, examined them. A wry grin. They stopped trembling. He began to search the ship systematically, because something was in it that had no place there. He did not hurry. *Part of the art of meeting fear is to take your time, meet it on your own terms...*

... On the door of the hold that Boardman called "the hot-box" was stencilled a large red triangle. Beyond the door was stacked enough explosive material to destroy a good deal more than the ship: and the most deadly of it was contained in a tiny device kept permanently sheathed by a foot of lead inside a coffin-shaped box. Inset into the wall by the door, at eye-level, was a radiation counter. Retford inspected its dial with swift, expert eyes. It was reading significantly above norm: there in the hot-box, the sword was out of its sheath.

And something was moving in the hold.

Retford opened the door without preliminary or fuss. He did not draw his sidearm or rush over the threshold shooting. He merely opened the door. He knew already what moved within.

It was Macbeth who knelt over the unsheathed nuclear charge, and his face was barely recognisable when he looked up at the engineer. The pale manic eyes were still-centre of a jerking, twitching, dirt-encrusted mask. He dribbled. Congealed blood matted his stubble of hair. His killer's hands were bleeding. Retford felt sympathy, for he

knew now what had happened to the weaponeer; he felt sympathy even then, alone with the madman he had once sung to, the dribbling thing he had played chess with: alone with both their deaths summed up in that small device under Macbeth's hands.

"Don't do it, Macbeth," he said. He strove to keep his voice level and amiable. "There's no percentage in it. You won't achieve anything. What's done is done. Finish yourself if you need to, but not us, not the rest of us." An objective part of his mind noted clinically that his voice was fighting for his life. "You—we—couldn't help what was done out there. Don't do it. Give us a chance."

Macbeth's answer came in a cracked, bleached whisper; impossibly amplified, like a soft insistent voice of a nightmare.

"Guilt. That's what you said, isn't it, Poet? Guilt. They're haunting me, Retford: it has to stop. I have to make amends. There's one of them in here now."

"I know," said Retford. *There's one in here all right, you poor fool.* Here was a chance.

"It's behind you," he said, raising his voice just a fraction.

A cinema trick. It didn't work very well. Macbeth was a fighter still, in the very nadir of his insanity, his pain. He didn't turn to look. But he blinked and hesitated a bit and it was the only chance the engineer would have. Retford moved with heart-pumping, gut-twisting speed, hand striking down, down, to the sidearm, touching it, beginning to pull...

But he wasn't a killer. He couldn't shoot the man, *O, Christ*, he couldn't shoot a man he'd laughed with, his hand was frozen, he couldn't kill...

So he jumped him instead, knowing that the game was lost before it was begun, because he was not a killer, and because the madman was. Macbeth met him halfway, working entirely on conditioned reflexes. A quick deceptive jab with his fingertips. Retford folded in agony. A particular pressure-point in the neck and Retford was down,

and helpless, and hopeless. He watched the madman take his sidearm. The muzzle was a black, inevitable eye, watching him. Then the unavoidable darkness took him and he was sad because many songs would remain unsung.

"I'm sorry, Jesus," said Macbeth, looking down at the bright silky hair.

And blew the ship to glory.

#### THE IMPERFECT CADENCE: EDWIN

*Movement. There will be a last movement. Boardman is dead, caught in the flowering horror of fire that burst the ship. Burst it. We came to the ship and it burst. The captain, he looks like a burnt puppet but one of his legs is gone away, all gone away. I think I am mad with it you see.*

*What happened, what happened to young Retford, poor young longhair-poetsinger, what happened so hard it split the ship like a rotten orange? An orange in a grey gutter under a brown foot. No. That is somewhere else, here there are flowers green and white made of brittle translucent glass. No. That is not what it is at all. Try again. That is not here, it is in my head because of the hurt, that is not this country.*

*Really, this is the lava-plain, this is the crimson hour of our deaths, various, multiplanar. Here is a great hole, a charred mouth smoking instead of our silver spider ship. Beside the hole this hovercraft is dead like a broken-necked swan. Like a broken white swan. We never found Macbeth, poor old Macbeth, shot the beasts, the swaying beasts. Boardman! We haven't found Macbeth!*

*He won't talk anymore. He called me Diane at first. There's a big red flower growing out of this brokenback-brokenbird.*

*I can't reach the cannon. I must try and reach a gun because they might come back, but there is too much hovercraft on my stomach. Leaning on me, all of it, upside-down and broken: deadbird. Boardman! I can't move and he won't talk.*

*We aren't going anywhere. Ha. Boardman, my sad captain, he isn't walking anywhere with that leg gone for a flower. We killed those beasts, yes. Perhaps they blew the ship for revenge. What happened to poor Retford when it bloomed like a big flower?*

*I can't reach the cannon. There'll be a last movement—*

*Those beasts, will they come back, neckswaying and awkward?*

*Will they come?*

REPRESENTATIVE

*by*

DAVID ROME

*From an insurance agent's viewpoint there was nothing unusual about the young couple; they were a normal, happy, healthy, confident husband and wife team. Perhaps a little too healthy and confident!*

## REPRESENTATIVE

AFTER the Brownings left, Catton went and looked at himself in the mirror. He ran his fingers through what was left of his hair, peered gloomily at the bags of crinkled flesh under his eyes, became depressed by the amount of grey in his moustache.

"Too young to be real," he growled.

"What, dear?" Mary said, coming into the bedroom.

Catton grunted negatively, sat on the edge of the big double bed and began pulling off his shoes. From the corner of his eye he watched Mary undressing. He winced a little when she eased out of her girdle. She saw his look.

"Burt Catton," she said, without rancour, "you can't change your own age and you can't change mine. Give Angeline Browning a few more years and she'll spread a little too."

"Not sure I want to change anything," Catton grunted.

He undressed and put on his pyjamas and climbed into the big creaky bed beside Mary. Time was, he thought, when we lived in apartments and oiled creaking beds—and people, young people like the Brownings, looked back at us out of our own mirrors.

But why the Brownings in particular?

Why do they get under my skin?

He turned and Mary's closeness was something that he valued. Fifty-seven years old, Catton thought. And I'm one of the lucky ones. Those years of football paid off. Sure, I've got a spare tyre and varicose veins. But I'm fitter than most men my age. Damn the Brownings, he thought.

Did they think they were so young that nothing could touch them?

"Dear," Mary said, the softness of her hair against his cheek. In the shadowy room it could have been dark hair, not grey, the beautiful hair she had had thirty years before.

"H'mm?" Catton said.

"Nothing. I just wanted to say it."

"Think I need sympathy?"

"Do you?"

"If only," Catton said, "they wouldn't laugh when I mention insurance."

"Well, insurance isn't Paul Browning's field. He doesn't understand it the way you do."

"They're not so young," Catton said. "Nobody's so young. So young they can be sure about the future."

"Golden futures," Mary whispered beside him. "That's what you give people, Burt. Hope and security and confidence. That's important. To represent that to people."

"Sure, sure," Catton said. "A balding insurance salesman past middle age. You make me sound like the angel Gabriel."

Next morning was Monday, and Catton came downstairs to find Mary sniffing and snuffling over breakfast. Summer cold, she diagnosed. Maybe, Catton agreed. But she ought to coddle it. Laugh. He didn't want to collect that insurable interest yet.

Mary drank two cups of coffee but couldn't stomach any food.

After breakfast, Catton sent her back to bed and telephoned the Browning house.

"Angeline?"

"Yes, Burt?" The low sweet voice was a song of youth in Catton's ear, even at eight in the morning.

"Angeline, I wonder if you could drop in to see Mary sometime this morning? I've put her to bed with a cold."

"Yes, of course," Angeline Browning said. "No trouble at all."

It wouldn't be, Catton thought, with a trace of malice that annoyed him the more because he didn't regret it.

"Are you off to the office now?" Angeline asked brightly. Catton muttered something automatic, and put down the phone. He went up to see Mary before he left.

"Angeline's dropping in later, to see how you are."

"Oh, Burt, I'd rather you hadn't asked her to."

"Well, they're neighbours," Catton said.

"But," Mary said, "Angeline will be so pleasant and persuasive. I'll feel better in no time. And what I'm really looking forward to is a terribly lazy day in bed."

Catton brushed his lips on Mary's hair. She smiled and pressed his hand. Sometimes he wondered how much of a ritual their life had become. Sometimes he wondered what Mary really thought of him now . . .

But, hell, there weren't any dragons for him to go out and kill.

Were there?

Backing his Ford out of the garage, Catton saw Angeline Browning in the yard next door. She was watering the garden before the sun got too warm. She waved to him and smiled. The air was moist and her slim figure seemed to waver unsteadily, as though she wasn't quite real, as Catton turned into the street.

Why do they get under my skin? With their bright smiles and their clear eyes and their shining youthful armour . . .

Because they laugh when I talk about insurance?

Catton's throat felt parched by the time he got downtown. He wondered if he was catching Mary's summer cold. He negotiated the traffic and found a spot near Andy Ducklin's. He went into the warm grillroom and ordered coffee.

Sheldon Merrick, of Granite Insurance, was sitting alone at a corner booth. He beckoned Catton over.

"Hi, Burt, want to share a cold?"

Catton stirred sugar into his black coffee. He sipped, leaned back in the leather booth. Over at the counter, Andy Ducklin sneezed.

"Seems like half the city has caught your cold, Shel."

"It wasn't my cold, Burt. My brother-in-law was sneezing it around a couple of days ago."

Catton frowned. "I'll give odds that Browning won't catch it."

"What did you say?" Merrick asked.

Catton looked up from the black depths of his coffee. Merrick didn't look well. His long face was pale, his eyes red and scratchy. Merrick was another old-timer like himself. Granite had been his company for thirty years.

"Browning," Catton said heavily. "Young guy next door to us. Young and fit. So damn sure of himself."

"Browning?" Merrick raised one greying eyebrow. "I know a—"

"He won't take out a policy," Catton said. He leaned forward to look into Merrick's eyes. "In fact, he laughs when I mention it. Doesn't try to explain why he isn't interested. Just acts as though he's going to live forever."

"Now there's a coincidence," Sheldon Merrick said. "I know a Browning, too. And he won't touch insurance. Slick young guy who seems to think—"

"Tall, square-jawed, crewcut hair, green eyes?"

"That's him, Burt. 1022 Medford—"

"1022 Logan. He's my neighbour, Shel."

"Pretty wife named Ellen?"

"Angeline."

"Not the same. Mine's Andrew Browning."

"Paul."

"But two Brownings. Both look alike. Both at 1022."

"Medford for mine."

"Logan mine."

"Burt, that's something."

"Yeah," Catton said. "That's something."

Catton sat over his coffee after Sheldon Merrick left. Each time a customer came in, and moved down to one of the padded leather booths, Catton watched closely. He noticed that most of the people who came into Andy Ducklin's had colds. Andy's own sneezes came with a regular staccato rhythm.

Catton finished his coffee and took it to the counter. He started to leave and then changed his mind. He went to the phone booth at the rear of the grillroom, ran the tip of his finger down the lists in the book until he found it: *Browning A.C. 1022 Medford. P'burg.* Then he closed the book and phoned Angeline Browning at 1022 Logan.

"Hi, Burt, I was with Mary a couple of moments ago. She's fine."

"Better?" Catton said.

"Well, I've persuaded her to sit and watch TV. It's just a summer cold, Burt."

"Easy to pick up," Catton said. "These summer colds spread fast."

"Yes," Angeline said.

Catton rifled the pages of the book for an instant before he said, "Oh, Angeline, do you have relatives over on Medford Street?"

"Relatives?" Her voice was dark sweet laughter again.

"Over on Medford."

"Is that in Pageburg, Burt?"

"About a half mile west of Logan."

"Oh," Angeline Browning said. The phone whispered to Catton for long seconds. Then: "No, we haven't any relatives in Pageburg. We don't know any other Brownings here. What . . . address is that . . . on Medford . . .?"

"1022," Catton said.

Angeline was silent.

"Are you there?" Catton asked.

"Yes. I was just thinking."

"Thinking?"

"What a small place the world is these days."

Catton's secretary, Miss Furbitt, had a cold too. All morning, while Catton waded through his paperwork, she dabbed and sniffed and blew. Gloria Furbitt was a tall gangly girl and a cold did not look good on her.

Catton ate lunch at his desk, then tried to concentrate on his paperwork again. But there was something seeded in his

mind. It was in there, like a piece of grit in an oyster, and Catton could not ignore it. Finally, he had to hunt it out.

He looked at it from every angle.

It was nothing.

Was it?

"Glori," Catton said. "Would you have a hope of finding the phone books for the past three years?"

"Three years? Oh, I don't think so, Mr. Catton."

"Try," Catton suggested.

Miss Furbitt vanished and returned twenty minutes later, her cheeks bright pink and smudgy with dust. She showed him the three books with an air of triumph.

"Mr. Harris had the two *old* books, Mr. Catton. You know how he just tosses things to one side."

"Thank you," Catton said. He put the three books neatly in front of him, one on top of the other, the most recent at the bottom of the stack. He glanced up into Miss Furbitt's bright eyes. "I think you can go home now, Glori. Better look after that cold of yours."

"But, Mr. Catton, it's just three o'clock."

"That's okay. Nothing important to do."

She smiled her thanks and took a few flurried minutes to depart. Catton waited until she had gone. When he sat alone in the office, at his desk, with the three phone books in front of him, he felt a little foolish.

The telephone burbled at his elbow.

"Burt? Josh Harris here. Look, I've got this damned bug that's going the rounds. I'm calling it a day . . . I wondered . . . if anything vital crops up . . ."

"I'll handle it," Catton said. Then he said, "Look after that cold, Josh."

Harris hung up. Catton put down his own phone. He blew his nose and put his handkerchief away in the pocket of his grey business suit. He brushed nervously at his moustache with one fingertip. The air-conditioning purred from the duct in the ceiling.

Catton opened the first book. He counted the number of Brownings in the book.

Twenty-six.

The office seemed suddenly still. Catton slowly put the book aside and opened the second book. Last year's. He counted the number of entries under Browning.

Twenty-eight.

The final book lay in front of him.

It had come from the drawer of Miss Furbitt's desk. It was clean and crisp, the most recent book, and Catton opened it now and began to run his finger down the lists of Brownings the way he had at Andy Ducklin's grillroom.

He checked, turned the page. He began counting again.

There were too many Brownings.

J.B. hadn't come in today, his secretary told Catton.

Her bright eyes watched disapprovingly as he went through to the inner sanctum. She followed, hovering in the doorway. J.B.'s office was all green leather and heavy dark pieces of furniture.

The out of state directories were ranked on top of a bank of filing cabinets.

"Did you want something special, Mr. Catton?" J.B.'s secretary asked.

"New York phone book," Catton muttered, finding it at that same moment.

She watched him speed the pages under his fingertips. Brownings. He found them.

By the thousands.

J.B.'s secretary was curious. "Is something wrong, Mr. Catton?"

"Wrong?" Catton glanced at her. As his eyes held hers, she took a handkerchief from her sleeve and blew daintily.

I have to be sure, he thought.

"No, nothing's wrong." He closed the New York book and returned it to its place.

Catton drove quickly out of Pageburg centre. The traffic seemed lighter than usual, lighter than it had been that morning. He drove on past his turn into Logan, moving

through wider stiller streets now, trees leaving flaccid shadows in the pale evening light.

He made the turn into Medford Street slowly, somehow feeling that the moment called for drum rolls and a black sky.

Evening sunlight.

A flabby balding insurance representative.

A pleasant tree-lined street.

No drama here. Nothing could happen in Medford Street. Nothing could happen that would involve Burt Catton, make his skin crawl, make the ruff of hair at his nape want to climb up his scalp . . .

*Could it?*

He slowed and drew into the curb.

1026. He drove on slowly.

1024.

He halted outside 1022. He sat in the car, looking out through the side window. In the purple summer dusk he became aware that a figure had emerged from the house and now stood on the front porch, watching him.

And Catton's skin *did* crawl.

The figure was Paul Browning.

For long minutes they held to their separate islands—Browning's the shadowed porch, his the warmth of the car—and then Catton clicked down the door handle and stepped out into the blue night.

Somewhere, far off, a motor-mower sang and whispered its way over lawn already smoothed with care.

Somewhere, far off, a star flashed and glowed in the deepening night.

Catton's steps rang clearly on the sidewalk. Dark was closing down fast now. By the time he turned into the walk of 1022, the face of the man on the porch was obscured.

Catton knew he had been mistaken.

This wasn't Paul Browning. The cut of his clothes was different. So were a hundred other little things. *Individuals*, Catton thought. *They're still individuals.*

Catton stopped. He stood looking up at the tall young figure who merged with the darkness of the porch.

Somewhere behind Catton a puff of wind scraped softly among the shade trees.

"Mr. . . . Browning . . . ?"

"Yes." The reply was instantaneous. Unwelcoming.

Catton took a step forward. "My name is . . . Catton. I represent the Golden Future Insurance Company . . ."

"I'm sorry," the tall figure said. "We're not interested in insurance."

"We?" Catton said, leaving a question in the air.

"My wife and I."

"Angeline . . ."

"Ellen," the tall figure said.

Catton took another step forward. "Mr. Browning, I'd like to talk to you about insurance."

"I told you we're not int——"

"You're making a mistake," Catton said gently. His eyes probed the shadows of the porch. Then, quietly, he said: "A serious mistake."

The tall figure moved. Or Catton imagined that it did.

"A mistake?"

"Can't we talk about it? Inside?"

The screen door squeaked and another figure joined the first. Catton could make out long and limber legs, the soft bell of a summer dress.

"Why not ask Mr. Catton in?" Ellen Browning said gently. "After all, he's come here especially to see us."

The dark young figures parted and made way for him. Catton climbed the porch steps and stepped past them, moving into the house. Ellen Browning was wearing a perfume that made Catton think of meadows and fresh wind and moonlight.

Lights came on and the house was suddenly bright and pleasant to be in. The Browns flanked him.

"You have a nice place here . . . " he said.

"Thank you," Ellen Browning said. "But we really haven't settled in properly yet."

"Oh? How long have you been here?"

"Just a few weeks."

Catton nodded and tried to smile. But his face muscles twitched. He sneezed, took out his handkerchief and blew gustily into it.

When he lowered it again, his smile was in place.

"Where are you from, Mr. Browning?"

"The . . . West Coast . . ."

"Oh? I don't think I recognise the accent."

"You mentioned insurance," Browning said.

"And a mistake we're making," Ellen Browning said.

Catton sat down. He smiled up at them. "You're a handsome young couple. You have a nice home. I think I glimpsed a new car in your garage. Almost the perfect average American couple, you could say . . ."

"Go on," Browning smiled.

"Too perfect. Too sure of the future in a world where nobody's *sure* . . ."

Browning's laugh was a softness that filled the room. "I don't want to deter you, Mr. Catton, but we have already dealt with one persistent salesman . . . I believe he represented the Granite Insurance Company . . ."

"Even you can't be sure. That's the mistake you're making," Catton said.

"We're sure. The future looks rosy for us, Mr. Catton."

"Don't be too sure." Catton rose abruptly from his chair.

"Where are you going, Mr. Catton?"

"Home to my wife. I've had a long day."

"Oh, no . . ." Browning said.

The telephone rang. It jangled through the room. Browning spun towards it, one hand rising. Catton went past him in a driving rush. The point of his shoulder slammed Ellen Browning off her feet. She screamed and fell in a flashing of bare legs and creamy petticoat.

Catton burst from the front door and on to the porch. Around him, the night was warm and still, the stars like yellow pebbles at the bottom of a black sea. Catton reached the car before Browning emerged on to the porch. He

twisted the key. The Ford was tired too. It coughed. Browning came quickly down the walk.

Catton twisted the key again and the engine roared to life. He took off with a howl of rubber on the night street. A roar of shooting came from an open door as he accelerated along the street. On TV, the corpses were piling up.

Tyres squealed as he turned at the end of the street. He drove hard, steadily, watching the dark oblong of his mirror. It remained dark. Empty.

*We have already dealt with one persistent salesman.*

The words remained fixed in Catton's brain. Sheldon Merrick. Had he started thinking too? Had he gone back to the house at 1022 Medford?

Catton knew Merrick's address. He had once shared a few self-sorrowing nightcaps with him after a representatives' dinner.

"In honour of the faceless men," Merrick had intoned.

"Gold watch at sixty-five," Catton had reminded him. "For achievement."

"When we don't know how to use time any more?"

Catton wheeled the Ford left, almost missing the turn. He was aware of time hurling past. He was afraid for Mary's sake. But still, with all the evidence of his eyes and ears, he could not quite believe it.

He had to find Sheldon Merrick first.

Catton slowed, watching numbers in the broad lighted street. He spotted Merrick's apartment building and turned into the parking area. He hesitated before he killed the engine.

Stepping out, he felt the weight and immensity of the starry sky overhead.

The night was sticky and he was sweating freely. He wondered how afraid a man could become before he ceased to function, before his will to fight and survive dissolved like a small flame in a gale.

He located Merrick's windows, but they were dark.

It was dark in the well under the building too, where he

waited for the elevator. Someone had smashed the bulb and the thin shards of glass crackled under his feet. He found the button and pressed it. Silently, the elevator came down for him.

Catton stepped into the lighted cage and was carried upward. The walls of the elevator were painted green. As it whined closer to Merrick's floor, his heart began beating faster.

He stepped out, and oriented himself. There were faint sounds from doors he passed. TV sounds: the distant booming of stage voices, words without reality. He walked quickly towards the door at the end of the corridor, hoping he had been mistaken, hoping to see a thin edge of light under Merrick's door.

There was no edge of light, and the door was locked.

He hadn't thought of that. In fiction, doors were never locked. They were left conveniently ajar.

He realised the stupidity of wasting time.

But he was human. Stupidly human. Mary might be in danger by now. But Catton felt a closeness to the man, to the greying ageing indestructible representative of the Granite Insurance Company.

Old insurance men never die . . .

*They just fade away?*

Catton pressed his ear to Merrick's door. There was no sound inside. Light spilled into the corridor as the door of the apartment next to Merrick's opened. A woman came out, carrying a cup. She did not notice Catton. She walked to a door further down the corridor and pressed the bell. Catton stared at the white cup in her hand, not comprehending.

But of course! The time-honoured custom of neighbourly borrowing.

A late night cup of coffee, and no sugar to hand.

A stroke of luck. The woman disappeared into the next door apartment. Her own apartment door stood ajar. Catton heard the throaty whisper of a TV voice.

He stepped into the lighted apartment. There was no one

in front of the TV set. He crossed the room swiftly, making for one of the two bedroom doors. Someone came out of the kitchen at the instant he slipped into the darkness of the bedroom. The door closed, his heart hammering, he heard the heavy sound of a man's cough.

There was a child sleeping in the room. The window was open, a removable screen making a soft mesh against the starlight. Catton raised the window, took out the screen. The child stirred restlessly, snuffling in sleep. Catton looked out of the open window. He had guessed right. There was a common sun deck serving both apartments, with only a railing between.

A minute later, he was inside Sheldon Merrick's apartment. The night breeze blew in through the open window at his back.

*Suppose an alien race wanted to conquer earth.*

*A race capable of shape changing, of assuming forms other than its own.*

*Infiltrate. Who notices the Brownings, the pleasant young couple who move in next door? Who notices that there are too many of them?*

*Until it's too late.*

*And to weaken resistance, they seed the wind with spores. Spores that will cause sickness but probably not death.*

*People might be useful later.*

The summer breeze stirred the hairs at Catton's nape. He turned and pulled down the blind. He groped his way across the bedroom and found the light.

Oddly, Catton felt obtuse pride as he looked at the smashed room.

*Merrick had put up a fight.*

In the living-room, the phone was off the cradle, hissing to itself. Catton wondered who Merrick had been trying to call. Perhaps himself?

On one wall there was a clear handprint in blood.

At first, Catton couldn't find Merrick. He went through each room, but all he found was one shoe.

And then he found what he thought was Merrick.

But he couldn't be sure.

He took up the phone and sat on the studio couch and dialled Mary's number. The line hissed and whispered, reminding Catton of meadows and fresh wind and moonlight. He couldn't get through.

He couldn't reach the police, either.

*Disrupt communications.*

*Let battle commence.*

Noiselessly, Catton let himself out of Merrick's apartment. TV sets still growled celluloid threats from behind closed doors. At the end of the corridor the elevator stood waiting.

Catton ignored it and clattered down the concrete stairs instead, the iron handrail blurring coolly under his fingers. He stepped into the well of darkness under the building, the hairs prickling erect along his forearms.

The stars were ugly when he emerged into the parking lot.

Pulsing. In mitosis they had launched themselves at earth.

He ran to the Ford and closed himself in its metal womb. He drove fast, headlights cutting holes in the night. Mary was his own concern now.

She was his responsibility.

*No one else.*

He let himself into the house.

When he switched on the lights in the living-room he felt a wind of fear sweep through him. Everything was so neat. So carefully arranged. It wasn't the way Mary would have left the room.

He found her in the bedroom, moving to where she lay on the freshly made white bed. As he touched her, her grey hair spilled over the edge of the bed and her face turned upward so that he could see down into her eyes.

He saw himself, and the love she had had for him. He saw it so clearly that for an instant his heart leaped and he imagined that her lips had moved, were smiling up at him.

But Mary would never smile again.

He went downstairs. The Brownings were waiting in the living-room. Tall, dark shadows, the front door open behind them, summer wind gusting in.

"You killed her," he said softly.

"Some of you must be killed. Some of you are too dangerous to be allowed to live . . ."

I am dangerous, Catton thought. A balding insurance agent past middle age, and they're afraid of what I might do. Doesn't that give us a chance? If I can get out of this house and warn people, before it's too late, doesn't that give the human race hope?

*Yes, a voice whispered inside him.*

Mary was dead. But it wasn't hate that made Catton take up the heavy poker from the hearth. Now he understood why Sheldon Merrick had fought so hard a fight.

Some men were born to this.

A few representatives, he thought.

Burt Catton stepped forward, towards the Brownings of the world, the brass poker gripped in his fist.

*Maybe I'll earn that gold watch after all.*

THE BEACH

by

JOHN BAXTER

*To the human lemmings on the beach the sea was  
the edge of their world. What overpowering force  
urged them to stay there?*

## THE BEACH

JAEL lay in his burrow and waited for the sun to rise. All over his naked body, down his right arm and leg, on his head, his ear, his neck, the soft sand weighed heavily, heavily. He knew that, if he were to move, the blanket of sand would split and slide, exposing him, and he was careful to remain perfectly still. It was a trick you learned after you had lived for a while on the beach.

From the weight of the sand, and the pressure in particular on the side of his head, he knew that it was damp. Perhaps it had rained last night (rain on the beach at night, drifting gently down in the perpetual silver light of the lamps?); perhaps it was the dew, silent as dead hands, that had dampened the sand, clumping it, making it heavy and chill.

In front of his eyes Jael sensed but did not see the pages of his Book. Folded tent-like over his head it kept the sand out of his eyes and gave him air to breathe. He knew it as an implement now, not a thing which had any meaning in itself, and if the words on the warped and fading pages had ever meant anything, they had long ago ceased to convey it to him. Jael had been on the beach for a year, long enough for the mind quietly to free itself of things like the ability to read. On the beach, one floated, the mind out of gear, disconnected.

Thinking about floating took a long time. When he had finished, there was a triangle of golden light on the sand under his eye, a pointer that tracked slowly across the plain bounded by his cheek, the sand piled up around his face and the yellowing page tented over his eyes. He watched the pointer while it inched for a few centimetres across the

rippled sand, then closed his eyes and warily sat up. Sand spilled off him in thick clumps, like crumbling cake, as he stretched, turned and struggled to his knees, facing automatically towards the rising sun.

He was not the first awake. Further down the beach, about a hundred yards away, figures were walking towards the surf. As he watched there was a minor eruption beyond them, and another man reared up out of the sand, shook himself, stretched, stood up. Jael couldn't place him. Perhaps he was a new man, or maybe an old one moving closer to the main group. It didn't matter. Curiosity wasn't forbidden; just too much trouble.

The sun's disc was above the horizon, balanced a little above the unmarred line of sea like some perfect abstract symbol. The water below it was a clean blue, shading to green in the shallows where, at the last few feet, it dissolved into white foam. Rolling in from the ocean in oily hummocks, the waves curled (striated undersides ribbed like muscles stretching), frothed and broke, effortless as were all things to do with the sea. The air, warming, lacquered it all with a shine of newness, polishing, cleaning. Each day was a new day on the beach, a slice of the future laid down clean and virgin with the promise of yet another tomorrow.

Jael dived and swam in the surf for a few minutes, treading water beyond the line of gentle breakers to look back towards the beach and sluice the sand from his hair and body. Under his pedalling feet, white and distorted through the water, he could see the sand falling, flecks of silica glinting back the first sunlight, until it landed on the white sandy floor. The fantasy always recurred at these times that he himself was dissolving, his body flaking away to join the sand of which he was so much a part. Ashes to ashes, sand to sand, until finally nothing remained but a crystal skeleton barbing out of the rippled white? Perhaps ...

He blinked away the image, ducked his head under and swam back to shore. Jael didn't understand what came over him at these moments. It was a sort of dreaminess compounded of the sun, the water, the sand, a drunkenness of

sorts in the grip of which it didn't matter what happened or why. Some people got it badly. Waking up one morning, they would swim out through the waves and not stop swimming. Occasionally their bodies would be washed up in the evening tide, stirring like sodden driftwood in the slushing froth. Always on their faces was the look of supreme ecstasy, the face of one who has seen God.

Jael went back to his book, the one object that gave him position in the desert of the beach. Everybody had a marker; a towel perhaps, frayed and bleached by the sun; a radio, long since run down but still treasured, wrapped perhaps in a plastic bag to keep out the sand, the bag scratched until it was almost opaque. Further up the beach one man had—or did have, as far as Jael could remember—a huge beach umbrella, once bright with orange and yellow segments like a huge flower, now a rotted tree, the crooked trunk holding up a rusty framework to which a few shreds of cloth still clung.

There was movement in the surf. Jael shaded his eyes and looked down the shelving sand from which the sun was already blazing. A girl was coming out of the surf, moving steadily out of the waist-deep water, stiffening momentarily as each new wave thrust at her back, but turning the motion into power. She moved like all the beach people moved, as if they were part of the water, working in conjunction with it. Jael leaned on his elbow to watch.

The girl was beautiful. As she walked through the shallows, Jael admired her slim smooth body, browned as was his own until it was a coppered image, so dark that the nipples on her breasts stood out like light pink flowers against the unmarred colour of her skin. Her hair was bleached to a transparent blonde, strawlike on her head, that on her body soft as a nimbus. Only the faint glow over her limbs indicated that it was there at all, and Jael knew that, to the touch, it would be as feathery as the wind.

Knee-deep in the white foam, she shook the water from her body like a surfacing animal and, gathering her long hair in her hands, squeezed the water from it. Still wet, it

fell in a smooth rope over her right shoulder, the ends pasted with water like fingers across one breast. Jael recognised her now. She was from the other end of the beach, a mile further up where the curve of the sand tightened and the point which separated this beach from the next thrust out into the ocean. What she was doing here he couldn't guess. Looking for a new place? Looking for a man? Jael toyed briefly with the idea of taking her, but discarded it. Almost as if she had read his mind, the girl looked towards him, turned, and moved back out through the surf, breasting the waves that now, with the turning tide, were moving in with new strength.

Jael watched her go, his eyes crinkled against the sun, and wondered why he had let her leave. She was beautiful, available. Normally he would not have paused for a moment before taking her, luxuriating in the act of making love to her, the heat of the sun on his back, the feel of the sand under their weight. Even now, the idea moved him, but he still had no real desire to go through the motions of even so casual and cursory a formality as showing his interest.

Why? The idea irritated him. He stood up and looked out across the surf, wondering if he would see the girl, but her head had disappeared. The missed opportunity smarted now. He saw it in context, as one of many such chances not taken, actions left incomplete and wasted, water running into the sand. As if the idea goaded him into it, he lifted his head and looked along the curve of the beach to the house-covered hills that surrounded it. He squinted, looked closer, squinted again.

Houses.

Houses!

Incredible that he had never noticed them before, never looked at them. It was as if his mind was drifting up out of a haze, focusing for the first time in years. He began to see the shapes of the roofs, the glint of glass in the windows, the sharp edges of chimneys against the relentless blue of the sky. They clung, he saw, these houses, like bats to a

cave wall, like monkeys crusted on their ledges, birds in a tree, their faces all turned towards the beach, their eyes watching, their faces, impassive as those of the dead, staring down with flat disdain and an unconquerable pride in their status as matter.

We exist, they said. Jael had no answer to them. He was not sure any longer that he himself existed.

He was seized by an uncontrollable impulse to run. Not to run and hide, not to flee, but to move, assert himself as a person in this suddenly inanimate landscape. He turned and, feet pistonning in the powder-soft hot sand, ran along the beach, skirting the sharp shadow of the concrete retaining wall that marked the beginning of the world. It was black, the shadow, and as his shadow feet flew horizontally towards it across the ruffled sand, he felt it begin to take shape and substance, to become a part of the world. His feet touched it, his shadow moved him along the black wall.

The wall itself was crumbling concrete, yellowed by the sun until cracks radiated over its surface like dried veins. The posts set into it were rusting away, eaten through with red blight, cavities and ulcers gaping to let in the cancerous sun. He grabbed one, pulled his hand away as the acid heat of the sun bit into his flesh. But refusing to admit that it had mastered him as it had the others, Jael grabbed again and hauled himself up on to the concrete. Sprawled there on the baking surface, his cheek pressed against its ravaged, decomposing skin, he looked at the world.

Shops—or he supposed they were shops—lined the road opposite. He saw their shattered windows through the bars of the pine trees planted with mathematical precision along the beach front. Under the trees, rotted pine fronds and cones were piled like pyres, waiting only a torch. Along the beach the trees were repeated, a mile of them, set like sentinels against the subtle assault of the wind, indomitable, irrelevant. Through their disarrayed crowns, the houses high on the cliffs looked down, staring.

The streets were not concrete, but asphalt. The material

had decayed more than the harder stuff, so that most of the streets were rivers of tarry slush that clung to the feet and separated into oily puddles under a yielding skin. Only in the shadows was it reasonably firm, and Jael stuck to the edges of the building line as he walked quickly along, paralleling the beach but refusing to look at it. He did not dare look at the beach again—not yet. Not . . . yet . . .

From the beach, the hills rose sharply, streets surging up in long curves to breast the first rise, then twisting to zig-zag higher. There was no longer an open empty sea-scape on one side to promise freedom. Houses closed in, fences enclosed, overgrown gardens thrust up ragged patches of vegetation as thick and impenetrable as hedges. Even the concrete footpaths were cracked, overgrown, grass and weeds probing up between the squares and shouldering them aside. Jael half ran, refusing to look at the houses, moving on up the hill to the point where, as the road met the top of the rise, a wedge of blue sky bit into the house-scape. From there, he could see out, beyond the beach, to what was around the curve of the headland.

Then he heard the music.

Jael didn't know it was music. There was no music on the beach, no false sound, only the natural timbre of the sea and the wind, the cries of birds and, sometimes, in the night, a scream as some beast, perhaps a man, perhaps not, met the dark creature that lay in the shadows, and died. He had never heard a disciplined sound before, and he followed it up the hill, to the last house in the street.

Time had beached the house in its place, deserting it on the hill-top like some ancient ark. Decades had left it untouched, as if time, like the sea, will brush a wreck and leave it dry of years, dry but for a rime of age that hangs like salt along the withered walls.

Jael approached it cautiously, wishing, without knowing why, not to touch the fence of wood and wire mesh that separated the overgrown footpath from the slightly more disciplined garden. In the centre of the fence a gate of tubular metal and mesh hung rustily open, though the path

beyond it had disappeared beneath the grass that, seeded and self-seeded again, had engulfed the area. Nothing was visible above it except the remains of an ornamental bird-bath surmounted by what must once have been a plaster stork. Weather had worn the bird down to a wire skeleton to which clung a few decaying scraps of plaster and, on top of the metal bones, a beakless head whose single eye fixed Jael with an unblinking stare, a single dot of perception in a mindless landscape.

The music went on, a thin continuity of notes hardly audible above the whisper of the grass. Without really knowing why, Jael went through the gate and to the foot of the steps leading to the house's verandah. The music was clearer there, a thin, bitter melody that the old dry house seemed itself to be playing on its withered tendons. Time had warped the boards of the verandah floor so that they twisted like ribs, part of the carcase of the beached house. Jael moved quietly across them and looked in the window. The glass was dirty. A lace curtain, sere as a dream, drifted about his face.

Frightened, hearing the music thicken in the air around him, he looked in.

There was a girl. He sensed rather than saw her, a patch of movement on the dark. Slowly his eyes became used to the gloom and he picked her out, sitting directly across the room from him, her back to the window. In front of her was an ancient upright piano on which she played an old, forgotten tune. Jael saw only the movement of pale white arms and shoulders, a watered blue dress, hair so black that it disappeared into the shadows. She might have been a ghost.

The room was incredible. Above the piano and to both sides the one wall Jael could see was massed with pictures, all of them ancient portraits and prints from an era before any he could name. Crazy faces, bearded and opaque, faded ladies in lace collars haloed in a milky oval or framed by a collar of gilt cardboard and an even more ornate plaster frame, overdressed children staring with blind savagery at

the camera; the inhabitants of a dead age, their faces as rigid as icons, stared down in implacable disdain and rage at the one living person in the room, a pale girl in a blue dress playing some long-forgotten song on an out-of-tune upright piano.

She stopped playing.

Jael froze, watching her shoulders as they turned. He saw her face for the first time, a pale oval in which two eyes as luminous as those of a lemur provided the single evidence of life. Her mouth was pale, thin, bloodless, fixed with a terrible smile. She stood up, and came towards the window.

Scuttling back across the buckling boards, Jael backed down the steps, ran stumbling across the waste of garden out to the street. His vision swam with the black dots of unaccustomed light; inside his head, his brain too seemed dazzled, too confused for any thought but a single obsession. Run.

The hill seemed to tilt under his feet as he ran, so that he scuttled like a desperate animal from side to side, the blind house fronts hemming him in, directing him always downwards, away from the sky, towards the beach.

From above, the beach and its encompassing promenade looked small and inconsequential, a meaningless variation in the smooth uniformity of the city that flowed down on it from the hills all round. He had never thought of the beach in that way before, as something small, grubby, insignificant. And he had never thought before about the houses, or noticed the way they surrounded the beach, totally cutting it off from everything but the sea, a crust of red brick and pine and bleached brown tile, anonymous and obscene in its remembrance of scabs and dried blood.

Under his feet the road was once again sticky, glutinous. He tore himself out of the muck, stumbled to the footpath and ran on. Now he was at the foot of the hill, but though the incline had disappeared he ran on, past the shattered shops, the shedding trees, the empty, echoing streets. The concrete began to crumble more, there was a handrail . . . through a haze of exhaustion he grabbed at it and vaulted

towards the pale haze that he sensed somewhere below, a haze of gold. The sand, hot, dry, clean, exploded against his body. Panting, he lay face down, feeling under his hand the pristine innocence of silica, accepting like a sacrament the heat and light that glowed beyond his closed eyes.

The dusk woke him. His daze was so close to death that it did not matter; a primal shock had blinded his mind as an explosion blinds the eye. Blinking, he sat up and looked around, the purple gloom lapping him like a tide. Dark . . . the dark fell out of the air, rose from the sand, swam from the land and the sea.

Faintly he heard the roar of the surf, saw the faint light of a fire further down the beach, near the water. He could hear voices, laughter, something like a song. Slowly, he walked towards the fire.

Each night, there was a party on the beach. As the dark came on, people huddled together, close against the dark and the cold. Turning inwards, they played and laughed, then, when the fire had died, crept off to lie under the sand and sleep, if they could.

Jael moved through the outer part of the crowd, ignoring the talk, stepping cautiously around the possessions piled up in separate, secret heaps. Books, radios, towels, bottles whose sun-greened depths threw back the firelight. In the same light, skin and flesh looked pale, sickly. His own, he saw, glancing at his arm, was the same, almost like that of the girl he had seen . . . where was it? When? Years ago, he decided, in a distant place.

Close by the fire, a woman was dancing, the light making the threadbare veils of her beach-coat as transparent as silk. She danced unnoticed, alone. Beyond the fire, there was talk, laughter. At Jael's side, another woman was drawing on an ancient swimming costume, so dried and ragged that the cloth was like the skin of a dead shark cast up and left to rot. As she pulled it over her thighs and hips, it crackled, desiccated, dead.

Jael walked on, in a dream. Past the fire, there was nothing but the light fading slowly out, and the last lip of surf

foam sliding up the beach, to retreat as it touched the fire-glow. He walked down out of the light until the water touched his feet, ankles, calves, cleansing him of the slime and dirt of the streets and beach alike.

Once used to the dark, his eyes could see a long way, and far out, past the pale foam of the breakers, he could sense the presence of . . . something. He walked forward, eager to see what it was, wondering what would hide out here, in the dark, in the silence and the cold. The water was around his waist now, surging up his chest as the waves came calmly in. He pushed off and swam, lazily turning over to let them slide under and around him. Then the breakers were past and he was in the smooth sea. Eyelashes heavy with water, he blinked against the weight, not wanting to close his eyes, not wanting to sleep. But as sleep came inexorably on, he felt a slow gathering of understanding inside, a knowledge of certainty that he had never had before.

Confidently, he swam on, not in the air, but down, into the dark, clean sea. His ears roared briefly, then he was in the cold blood of the ocean. Somewhere, below him, he knew his goal lay hidden, its light mantled in green, the sea creatures swirling down into the vast valley where it lay to worship at the unbelievable jewel gifted to them. Without fear, Jael swam towards the sea mountains, the peaks of which even now he could see gilded beyond the green. There, he knew with certain surety, he would find his goal, the sunken, brooding sun.

## THE CITY, DYING

by

EDDY C. BERTIN

*In a closed society with an absolute Police Force, the search for a new meaning to life could be almost paranoid. A brilliant new story by a young Belgian writer.*

HURRICANE, WAILING!  
Groaning trees  
under his  
unchained  
violence.

two lonely silhouettes were running through the wall of  
darkness bent against the storm's fury

LIGHTNING LIGHTNING LIGHTNING LIGHTNING

a tree SPLIT TING  
inflaming

burning  
RED  
VOMITING HELL

**BLINDING!**

The next moment, the nightmare was over, and Wade Henderson once again was back in reality. No bending trees, no hurricane, no wind like a crying voice. They were just confused flashes of his vivid imagination, visions of a far past of which he had once read in a book, long burned now. There was only NOW and reality. The reality was the City and World's End. But the lightning and the fire didn't disappear. The lightning was the cold searchlight of a Force Hunter, the fire the glow of the slowly disintegrating metal, where the concentrated laser beam had hit the pavement.

And the two running figures stayed also. They were trying to reach one of the skyrunways, to the right of the control-tower. The runway rose to meet the grey sky with a

sixty-degree corner. Almost at the very end was a small three-persons' flyer. The fugitives avoided the escalator, slowly crawling aloft, a lazy glittering worm.

...

RUNWAY

THE

UP

STAGGERED

THEY

LABORIOUSLY

The small flyer was a high-speeder.

It could take them out of the city, beyond the ash-plains, almost to the World's End. If they reached it, maybe they had a chance. Of course, they didn't reach it.

Wade had known it, as soon as he had seen the Hunter, hovering in the sky, a one-person thing of darkness with short delta-wings. The great seeker was behind on the tail, poison prickle of a scorpion. The black machine with the fins, seemed like an enormous ray-fish with a dead glass-eye. Seemingly lazy, it floated above the runways.

Its first shot had missed the fugitive couple.

*buzzing. bees. buzzzzzzing, loud, loud, loud  
silence. preGnant.*

Soon now, there would be other Hunters, called up by the signals. The movable searchlight had found the two and chained them in a circle of blazing white. For parts of a second, Wade saw them clearly. An already old man, in a simple grey suit, a business suit, and a young girl in her teens. Father and daughter? Lovers? Or simply two strangers, bound together forever (what was still left of forever for them now?) by a short period of live and violent death out of the threatening sky.

Now the Hunter came down, lying on its side. Lightning

crackled from its nose. The beam cut the runway bridge neatly in two. The first part with the flyer slowly bent, then snapped off and tumbled down.

CRASHING.

SPLIT TING METAL.

WRECKED.

The man and girl were rigid before the yawning emptiness below. Above the City, the other Hunter arose. Like hyenas they came, the sound of their motors an angry buzzing. The original one made a circling movement and floated slowly towards the couple. Now they wanted them alive, it flickered through Wade's thoughts. They can't escape, so now they'll take them alive. The next moment the older man looked at the girl and ripped off his oxygen mask. Even before the oxygen-poor air could start its suffocating working, the metamorphosis had begun. The two faces, chalk-white masks in the searchlight, changed as if suddenly a wisp of fog appeared before them and whipped their faces. Nose, mouth and eyes disappeared, leaving a featureless waxen mask of white pulsating flesh. They bent and their faces—or what was left of them—met each other. Tendrils of crinkling flesh seemed to reach out, and then it was over. Two, three light-bundles crossed and met at the end of the now much shorter runway.

HELL-FIRE

FLASHING

A BURNING, BLAZING MASS OF LIGHT.

Wade turned away, the fire burning down in his brain, his eyes hurting. When he looked again, even the ashes were gone. Circles and geometric forms of changing colours were turning before his eyes. Ashes, he thought. If that's still left at all!

He ordered his legs to move, his feet to go, while he drew his face in indifferent neutral lines. Madness, to have stayed

and watched for so long. Now he cursed his own stupidness, knowing that he wouldn't have been able to go on, without knowing and having SEEN the result of the hunt . . . even if it could have had only one result. Not a single Changer ever had had a chance against a flying Hunter. Well, it had to be that way, hadn't it? Because that was what they were—had been—two Changers who had got what they deserved. Deserved for what? Well, the Hunters would have had their reasons. There always was a reason.

Like BEING a Changer.

**KILL.**

**DESTROY.**

**DISINTEGRATE.**

**BURN INTO BLACK ASHES.**

Ashes have no name,  
no smell, no reproach.

**ASHES. BLACK.**

**NIGHT AND DEATH, COLOURS OF**

Wade wondered vaguely what would be said on the rapport-tape. Motive: revolt: murder: oxygen-theft? Or were no records used between men of the Force?

"Agent RM-3 of the People's Force reporting, sir.  
I just burned down two Changers."  
"Good. Two days' leave. You may go."

Would that be enough? Possibly. They were the Force. There had always been a Force, throughout the whole history of Mankind. There always would be. That had been the first curbing of the "freedom" of the survivors, in the midst of miles and miles of ashes and ruins, where once had spread the big cities. Well, at first a Force was needed, volunteers who could do everything, from medical treat-

ment to knowledge of weapons. The cases of A-poisoning. Looting, killing and senseless burning of what still stood upright. There was urgent need for someone with authority, and the means to enforce it. Like guns. Then some men had met, and formed the Force.

After many years, some of the ruins had been made habitable, at places where men still could live. Then new houses had been built, with deep cellars for when the oxygen on the surface became short. Then World's End had been created, until it had become the City, with around it the ruins, the ashes, and beyond them World's End, the enormous wall of energy, protecting earth's mutilated face against the now hotblazing energy of the sun, beating down mercilessly.

But it was dangerous to think so much. Further on, he saw the dull glimmer of a thought-probe. One was to be found on almost every second street corner. He forced himself to start counting, *one, two, three*, on the same slow rhythm. *Four, five, six, seven . . .*

The probes were crude machines. They only penetrated the upper layers of consciousness. They didn't exactly "read" thoughts, but just measured the brain's activity. The result was a curve on a plain sheet of paper, somewhere deep down in the Force's offices. If the curve suddenly went wrong, it simply r

e  
a  
d

## **DANGER**

Whoever was thinking there, was

- (a) a Force Man, and soon identified by his personal identity pattern
- (b) a Changer, whether he knew it or not, and soon liquidated

No questions asked. No answers wanted.

## BURN THEM DOWN!

*... eight nine ten eleven twelve*

Now he was beyond the probe, apparently no alarm given. He didn't smile. The Hunters were spreading above the City. Far away, they were now as thick as flies. Black, dirty meat-flies, with a great facet-eye and outstretched proboscis, slowly floating through the ever grey artificial sky.

Wade continued his way, breathing slowly. Keep your face straight, neutral, indifferent to the world, a mirror reflecting the reflection of another mirror. And obedient. One sheep in a flock. A bee in a swarm. An ant in a nest. And when you meet a Force Man, bow down your head. Don't forget: he is your PROTECTOR, your best FRIEND. Above all, think obedient and not too bright. The catcher that every Force Man carried on his breast, reflected your thoughts in grey tints. The catchers were far more dangerous than the probes. They went much deeper, some almost to the very edge of the subconscious. Sometimes Wade surprised himself by keeping his inner thoughts a secret from the catchers. He had once seen a man who hadn't been able to. In the midst of a bridge above a crater, a stranger had met a Force Man, and at certain places the catcher hadn't reflected the proper grey colours, but speckles of red. The catcher buzzed once, very short. The Force Man didn't hesitate a second. He didn't say or ask anything, he just lifted his stick and fired. The discharge took the passer-by in the face and tore away his mask and left cheek.

The part which was left changed, reforming itself, moulding to a white featureless mask, the face of a yet unformed wax doll. Eyes and nose disappeared behind loose, crawling and moving flesh. Only part of the mouth stayed, a black now toothless hole. The second shot burned away the rest of the head, and sent the headless thing over the edge. Even as it went down, tumbling around itself, the

Force Man shot again and again, making the dead thing jerk like an animated plaything.

Wade had never forgotten it, although he would see more things of a similar kind. He had been twelve years old then, one of the first times he had obtained permission from his official to leave the cellars and walk on the City's streets with an oxy-mask. It was the first Changer he saw.

He would see many more in his nightmares, faces which melted into blank milk-white THINGS, creatures which were shot, disintegrated, cut down like the mutated beast which had once prowled in the deserts. Creatures, dying, burning to black ashes, night shadows, possessed by alien sentiments which no sane human being could understand. Monsters, doing things about which the officials wouldn't speak but which one heard, in dark whispers, when there were no probes near.

With the upper layers of his consciousness, Wade kept on counting, calculating, dividing, multiplicating senseless amounts, while his real thought-life went through the second think-lines. Automatically he changed his oxy-filters after a while and controlled the geiger on his left shoulder at each watch-post. Often he had to walk over the bridges, long, small metal fingers across deep-yawning craters. Enormous toothless mouths, waiting

watching to devour in their ugly emptiness

He never looked down any more. He had, once ... but never again. Dimly he remembered the tortured metal constructions, distorted masses of broken and twisted steel, petrified metal spiders, frozen in an unimaginable moment of lost motion, their rank antennae crumpled and pressed to unrecognisable webs of scrap iron. Sometimes there were compartments, rooms, cracked and burst wide open, exposing their white entrails. He had thought he saw something small and white down there, but he was never sure it had been what he feared it could have been. Because on that moment, vertigo had crushed him down to a whimpering heap of fear.

They had to carry him away over the small silver tentacle, away from the grinning mouth. Since that day he never looked down.

Once, also, he had been sent on an errand outside the City's borders. For two full hours he had seen nothing but the eyeless parts of walls, dark skeletons of buildings and ashes, crazy fragments of a paranoid imagination, parts of immense buildings, almost completely sound, except that they lay on their sides, like enormous dinosaurs, tired after eons of dumb living, who suddenly had crouched down and then died. Blackened deathmarks on their twisted bodies, ashes everywhere. Ashes of human beings and pools of molten stone and metal.

#### *THINK OF SOMETHING ELSE!*

However he tried to turn his thoughts away, always they returned to the ashes, as if some unconscious wish for self-destruction pushed him.

But wasn't it logical? After all, both were part of the day, the ashes and the Changers. He had made further acquaintances with them, from the technical books, written by officers of the Force and from the warning and destructive articles, which appeared as regularly as clockwork in the City's Paper. From both of them he had learned ... nothing. Or almost nothing.

Even the Force never exactly stated of what nature the menace of the Changers was. They cried and shot and burned like fanatic maniacs, but they never said why. It was like a strange instinct that motivated them to destroy the Changers, where and whenever they could, just as if they were nothing but insects.

But not only the Force: "They are evil incarnations, which were given a horrid form of semi-life, to act from the Day on till the End of Time as disciples of the Evil Deity" (from AWAKENINGS, The Book of The City's Church, by City's Pope Oxurius XVI). The scientific publications said they were a new form of parasite, living on human beings' life-force. The City's Force had them locked up in special

reservations, to protect the good citizens against their vilenesses. It was a pity some of them sometimes escaped, but they never did get far. The strange thing was, that never one word was said about the whereabouts of these so-called reservations. In the City there were none, and didn't the City's Church say that beyond the City's borders there was nothing but ashes and dust, where nothing could keep on living for long? It was one of the many paradoxes it was better to forget. Wade had "forgotten" many of them.

He had been interested in the Changers, since he had first seen one burned down by violent death. Then he had wanted to kick the Force officer, but respect for The Force and conditioning had kept him from attempting it. The Force Man had looked at him, and Wade had bowed his head respectfully and gone his way. Now he knew that the reservations were a fiction. Changers lived their lives as perfectly normal people, until something unforeseen happened and they were discovered. Then they ran, but never long and never far enough.

The City's Code had many laws, the biggest part against the Changers. They were not human beings (then what the hell were they?), so they had no human rights (if you accepted the first). Pairing was forbidden to them (but the files in the Force's offices, where he often worked as a clerk for the City's Paper, said that a Changer could never beget or give birth to a child).

Of course, he had heard many whispers about the Changers: they were unearthly monsters out of somewhere in space who had landed after the Day; they were re-animated corpses who fed themselves with the flesh of living things; that they were a kind of android, spies for a new underworld power. What kinds of nonsense! Everyone who had just a little bit of sound mind, understood that they were perfectly normal people who suddenly changed into something else. Instead of burning them down on sight, the Force would do better to try and search for the reason, the meaning of their existence. At the same time, Wade knew the number of sound minds among the citizens was

extremely low. The ordinary man didn't need to think. The City thought for him, and he lived for the City. He ate, drank, breathed and paired in service of his Mother, the City. The City was his creator, lifegiver, midwife and protectress. The City gave him food and recreation. The City was everything to everyone.

Wade reached the gate. Together with others, he entered the lift, which took them down for a long while, deeper and deeper into the stomach of the earth.

At last, the elevator halted. Wade went through the long, lighted corridor and finally passed through the lock. He put his mask on the wall and went to his Room. He carefully locked the door, placed his book-case on the table and let himself fall on the bed, without taking off his clothes. Though he felt tired, there was something that kept him from sleeping. It wasn't the Changer's liquidation. He had often witnessed this kind of scene. He felt strangely uneasy. Finally he got up and filled a third of a glass of water. Practically seen, it was a foolish thing to do. He couldn't afford it, water being so expensive. And he was already beyond his weekly ration. But he needed the drink now. Slowly,

en  
joying  
the tepid  
drink, tasting  
each separate drop  
as it rolled  
over his  
tongue

When replacing the plastic glass, he observed with surprise that his hands were trembling. A strange feverish feeling burned inside him. He looked into the small mirror above the washing-table. He looked pale, worn-out. He couldn't have . . . No, NOT THAT! Quickly, he checked his Geiger, and then loosed his breath. No, he hadn't had an overdose of radiation. But then what in Chaos was the

matter with him? He once again tried to sleep, but it was no use. He kept on turning, while the breath of an unknown fear whispered in his ear. Vague, dreamlike memories stirred and passed by in his mind. At last, he sat up once again.

to look in the mir

ror

and see how a mask s  
eemed to cover  
the face that was once  
his  
how somethin  
g unknown and  
thereby fearful  
pulled at his face-muscles  
loosening t  
hem and turning them into a  
blubber.  
ing mass of white flesh

## TO UNDERSTAND, THEN!

SHOCK

why me?

BREAKING APART

why me?

TERROR

why me?

TERROR

W

TERROR

H

PANIC

Y

?

IT WAS A STEEL WALL, WHERE UPON  
HE CRASHED, HIS IDENTITY BREAKING  
UP INTO

A	T	H	AN	a	ae	pee	i
O	S	D	se	p	r	t	cs
U							

  

e	yi						
a h	r n	o	o	h l			
c	c g	u	f r	p			
			t				

## DESTROYING

He stumbled backwards, bringing his hands to the something that should be a face and wasn't. It was a lifeless wax thing, no nose, no eyes, not anything.

Then how come he saw it if he had no eyes?

**STOP IT.**

**THINK. SOMETHING RATIONAL.**

**NO EYES. HOW COME I SEE?**

Slowly he sat down on the bed, and stayed there, a statue. Easy now. Something has happened. Don't ask yet how and why. The eyes. No eyes. He felt his "face". No eyes indeed. Yet he saw everything. Normal? No, it seemed vague, a bit out of focus. Maybe the thing was transparent from one side? But what had happened exactly? He couldn't understand. It was as if something suddenly took over. Something? What? He felt completely normal. And yet . . . why the unease? The feverish feeling? The . . .

Then, something stirring, deep inside his thoughts. Moving. Interrupting. Something alien, and yet part of him. What? What are you? Answer me? Frantically, calling. What are you? Retreat of the something. Deep, deep down, inside. Wade tried to reach out again, but there was nothing down there. The thing was gone. Why? Had it become afraid? No, that wasn't the impression it left. It had seemed

more . . . not interested. As if it had come to find something, which wasn't there.

Wade just sat and tried to think it out. It was the only way not to go mad. His entire life had been based on the security of an inconspicuous existence. Now, suddenly, he found out that this security had only seemed to exist as long as he himself hadn't known. He, the own I, was one of those he had seen hunted and burned, one of those creatures which weren't man any more. Or were they? Wasn't he still Wade Henderson? He thought and acted like always. He wasn't changed . . . inwardly. Though still in shock, his mind roamed on, the urge for self-protection fully blazing. Stop thinking now. What if there was a probe nearby? Counting, one, two, three . . . madness, they would already be here if they knew. Just try to find a way out now. Maybe this was the reason why they always discovered Changers. Maybe it was just something which suddenly broke through, something which lurked deep inside of you, just waiting for the right moment. But would it last? He lifted his "eyes" (or whatever replaced them now) back to the mirror . . . and stared again at his own self. He was himself once again. Not a trace of the other thing left.

When at eleven o'clock the lights went out, he still sat on the bed, thinking, trying to figure out a way to normality. The darkness didn't bring any peace of mind.

The next morning it was even worse. How difficult it was, to concentrate your thoughts, when they raced like gibbering, mad monkeys around the cage of your skull. In any case, he could not neglect his job. They would send someone immediately. He went, thinking and counting, all day, very careful and very afraid. But the first days passed, and also his first fears. No one could see it. No one pointed to him and cried out, "Look out! There is a Changer!"

A strange, new life began now. He learned to hide his thoughts, deeper than before, until they became a glittering needle prick, down there somewhere. As time went on, he learned to know also what he called "the searching feeling" as he had no other name for it. This was during his nightly

walks, which were happening more and more frequently.

Something inside him drove him to go out, something for which he wasn't able to find a rational explanation, something which he only vaguely recognised as the alien thing he had felt during the Change. What was there to find in a world of ruins and ashes where every glittering light in the sky was a Hunter's searchlight? All the same, the strange, hurried feeling drove him outside nearly every night.

He quickly learned and accepted that now he was all alone. He always had supposed that the Changers formed a group, a society hidden within a society. How completely wrong he had been! There were others, like him, but he knew none. Often he met them, vague shadows in the twilight that lay like a cloak over the City and the World. All his efforts to talk to them were useless. They all evaded him and each other. Sometimes he reached forwards with a part of his brain he just learned to use, and shortly met their shadowlife. It was not telepathy. He could not read thoughts, not even feelings. It was just a short touch, a sudden meeting in the dark, like two hurried people in a crowd for a bus, their hands touching for part of a second, never to meet again.

Very often, Wade saw the cobra's eyes up above, a sudden brightness when a light searched its way between the dead houses. At other times, it was a passing black form, soundless, a nightly tiger in a steel jungle, armed with lights and probes and guns. He always managed to hide, but not all of his kind were so lucky. Then the Hunter left nothing but ashes.

This part of the World which is still one, has become a blast-furnace, Wade thought grimly in such moments, an enormous corpse-furnace, and the end is for all the same, dumb ashes. Sometimes, when he looked up to the grey force-screen that enveloped the City and formed the End of the World, he saw a glittering in the air, a golden twilight, very high, too high to be a Hunter's eyes, and then he suddenly sensed the alien thing in him, trying to reach out towards the strange brightness. But always it passed too

quickly. He tried to find out what it was, but found nowhere a clue. He only knew that there was something up there, which was different, as different from himself as he was from normal people.

So Wade continued walking in his double world through a night which belonged to him and his kind. It was an instinct which led him

impulse of a dog—must go out at once  
(hear something? yes, near!)

impulse of a lunatic—OUT! OUT!  
(moon, lovely cold hated full moon)

impulse of a lone wolf—howling, howling!  
(there are the others of the pack)

Wade's inner self answered the call out of the unknown.

walking the dead streets

here and there parts of houses, blind sentinels  
eyes closed, entirely led by feeling, instinct  
(never make a misstep—death is quick)

the night a velvet coat, a curtain over the ashes cracking  
under his shoes. being part of a curtain, a fringe of  
tapestry, an unspoken word

suddenly appearing out of the surrounding nothingness,  
walls with ragged edges, watchmen in dead light—far away  
the grey of World's End.

in	
him	
the	
unknown	pumping with his blood through his veins
	knocking in his head
	a vague hunger for something
	unknown, frightening
	senseless? no, NO! but what?

where to find it?

his masked life, far away, an unreality now no sense, a ghost-world. THIS was himself, Wade knew, the creeping, the knowing of being alive, the conscious breathing in and out, being Wade Henderson, a snake crawling through the stone garden of time.

the feeling and understanding of the ground (alive, breathing!) under him, an always moving atomic sea. the rubbles, dead pieces of chess of the gods, around which were still left vague areas of impressions of life, like shrouds.

sometimes sensing something alive, nearby, but hiding. another lonely searcher for something to give a sense to his life. then returning, hours later, with an unsatisfied feeling —something missing, something not found.

But then, at certain nights : a glimpse  
an explosion of light  
unseen light, more warmth,  
a sense of belonging  
understanding

WHERE? WHERE? frantic search, somewhere, not far, where? where? a short moment of UNDERSTANDING, OF KNOWING WHAT TO SEARCH FOR  
then gone, forgotten  
never the time to locate the WHERE

not a minute later, the black wasps, filling the air with their menace, the searchlights starting to draw white circles between the ruins

escape. hide again in the City, creeping through her entrails, and just knowing that there WAS a sense to it all  
next night again trying to find out.

hoping that some day, some night . . .

Another dull morning at the office. Ice-frozen smiles, quickly come and quickly gone on the flexible masks they called their faces, not really interested questions about health (tradition : nobody ever answering them).

Wade seated himself behind his writing desk and stretched his hand to his drawer.

The scream stopped his hand.  
The scream stopped everything.  
shattering the silence into pieces  
of a broken mirror-image

His secretary watched him, her eyes wide-open reflections of terror and disgust. After the first one, she stopped screaming. She just stood there, gasping, moving her mouth soundlessly.

Wade saw many things at the same time. He saw the petrified secretary, the other workers, turning around, the door of the private office of his department chief opening and a head (question marks in eyes) appearing.

All their faces reflecting his own fear.

He jumped up and stumbled over his chair leg. He recovered his balance and started running to the exit. One of his former colleagues got in his way. He sent him spinning to the floor with his shoulder. But already two others were up and between him and the escape-way. Behind him he heard the department chief calling. The sudden screaming of the alarm-bells mingled with the sounds his secretary uttered, having got her voice back. The exit was far, so far. He ran through a corridor which seemed to turn around under his feet, he was a prisoner in an enormous revolving web, a subterranean tunnel, and the only light : the door, seemed to retreat

further and  
further  
away

panic was a living parasite in his brain, paralysing his legs, eating away his reason  
he was running in a time-circle now, without moving his legs a petrified nightmare-second, a tear falling from a time-flower

now they had him no escape possible fear fear terror  
panIC

having kept it hidden for so long now to be caught rat in a trap by some stupid workers flesh and blood robots anger rising like lava to his head a red fog of hate, hate, HATE. Through the red fog he struck out. The something deep inside him took over, something very primitive and very angry, a red flame, a laser-beam, a lightning of HATE BURNING KILLING HATE something with his brain that he hadn't thought possible and would never be able again to remember or to repeat.

Something crackled in the hall. A chair rose from the floor by itself and crashed between the legs of the first attacker. With invisible hands which seemed to be growing like giants out of him, he threw the barrier of living, pulsating flesh and bone before him out of the way. Sudden light, and then he was outside. He grasped a mask and jumped in the first oxy-refresher tunnel. Not a second too early. The first black bug already appeared over the City.

Through the dark subways, crawling upon his belly, towards the outer parts of the City, afraid, so afraid. Sweat ran over his back (itching) and in his nose was the smell of his own fear. Slowly, oh, so slowly crawling, spider in the barrel of the long, long gun. Any moment now, they would shoot and the bullet would come after him like an express train. Sometimes he heard voices. Then he lay still, just listening. Waiting for the trap to close. When the street lights went out and outer darkness started to creep through the City, he came out of the inner darkness of the World. Then he started weeping when he realised he really had got away.

Maybe it can be considered ironical that he met her the first night he forever carried the stamp mark "Changer". It was the alien instinct which really found her. He was walking, eyes closed, and the "touching" went before him, almost a projection of his own, discovering the houses like vague shadow-forms beside the street ruins, and in the

Rooms the grey lights of the sleeping people. Then suddenly there was

## LIGHT

A sudden flicker, alive, the colour of panic, the smell of identity, then the fear changing to violet understanding. Then her "touch" coming out to meet his, two identity patterns flowing together, then breaking apart again. Not a sound uttered. Her pattern was the same: fear and hatred, loneliness and darkness and wanting and searching for something not yet found. Neither of them wondered why the Changers who had always evaded each other, now suddenly did not. They didn't think, they just smelled and tasted and probed each other's pattern, submerging into the other's ego, bleeding his wounds, feeling his pains and laughing his joys. They didn't bodily touch when they started walking through the dead City streets, but hurried as if something drove them to an unknown goal, an unheard voice, whispering "so little time..." He (or the urging thing in him) took her to a half-destroyed Room, just outside the City's borders. He didn't know who she was, how she was called, what she did. Those were the unimportant things. She was his supplement, the missing part of himself. She was a total of thoughts, impulses, sentiments which he would recognise everywhere now. Between them. a bridge

had been built their  
egos intertwining forming a flowing  
channel steady uninterrupted but still buried so deep

the probes wouldn't find it

It was like two opposite mirrors, each reflecting the other's reflection of itself into infinity. He saw and felt and tasted every nerve and ripple of her body and every cell of her mind, he smelled fear and horror and learned things which drove him to repulsion, and yet at the basis there was an understanding, an accepting of all the good and evil

alike, in her and in HIM, a wanting for warmth, for humanity . . . all the rest didn't matter.

All the time, the alien thing in him was growing, reflecting into the opposite mirror gallery. Now they stood before each other, the world outside a strange and far-away unreality. Their arms went up, like parts of rag-dolls. Their hands met each other's temples. They didn't know why they did it. The other thing now had completely taken over.

This was the answer. Their whole lives had led to this moment. It wasn't told to them, they just knew it, as if they had always known it, deep, deep in their very cells. The think-bridge between them grew, until it seemed a material reality. Small discharges tickled his fingers. Wade felt the slight pressure of her nails to his head, leaves carried in his face by an autumn wind. A strange tension spread over his skin, springing forth from her fingertips, overflowing his body. His spread fingers slowly moved, massaging her temples, discharging the alien energy. He vaguely saw her face, a pale spot in the surrounding darkness.

Slowly he bent his head towards her, but never touching her lips. They were two statues, two mirrors. He was falling into her face, and she in his, a spinning movement where they finally found each other, tumbling together in a spiderwebbed darkness, going over into each other's ego. It was a giving and taking, a two-way present of all the small, so important secrets of the mind, a complete surrender of identity. They couldn't understand it, only accept it. The alien energy was all around them, moving, caressing them in a web of golden threads. Their brains went spinning, gliding towards the centre of the timeless web and then they entered the heart of the centre, a sudden frozen moment of no-time, no-space

## no-identity c h a n g e

something suddenly at least fully awake, the alien things inside him and inside her, meeting, clashing, alive

petrified time  
no sound no thoughts  
nothing  
then . . . **EVERYTHING**

## then . . . EVERYTHING

## NOVAE

a world in the cup of his hand  
time-energy flowing through their veins  
the tension a roaring discharge of energy  
threatening to crush them

then . . . something bursting, giving away through flesh and bone and muscle, going through away-moving cells and coming

FREE  
BLAZING LIGHT FOR  
PARTS OF A SECOND ILLUMINATING  
THE DEAD WALLS FLASHING OF PURE ENERGY BUT GIVING  
NO WARMTH CELLS AND ATOMS SPLITTING AND REUNITING  
THEMSELVES INTO SOMETHING NEW SOMETHING FREE  
OF THE LAWS OF EARTH AND GRAVITY AND  
MATTER A NEW GENERATION A SEX  
WITHOUT SEX

Slowly, the cells crawled back, reformed themselves. Their features returned, their hands loosened their grip and they sank to the ground, unable to stand, to think, to move.

All energy, their bodies and minds could spare, was in the Something in the room. It had no specific form, always changing, just a golden sparkle of fire that wasn't fire. Something alive, intelligent. Fire without burning, thinking without an understanding. For a fleeting second, still standing on the brink of their contact-bridge, they wavered above chaos, were part of infinity, walking over the atoms and burning inside the sun, seeing for the first and only time the clockwork of space and time and their own small place inside it. For parts of a second, they sensed the thoughts of the new life-form their mind-union had created, thoughts they couldn't even grasp, far away from understanding.

Sounds. A shrill screaming, far away. Running feet. The door. Cracking. The sound of a laser-ray, hissing. Smell of burning plastic, smoke. The door crashed inside and the Force Men came in. A sudden lightning, making them fall back, covering their eyes. Then the light—all light—was gone from the Room.

"There goes our child," Wade whispered with grim satisfaction. They drove him up from the ground and the nearest Force man whipped the smile off Wade's face with the butt of his gun. It didn't matter now. The pain seemed to come from far away, as if it didn't happen to HIS body. As if his brain had lost all capacity to interpret pain. He was empty. The butterfly was gone, borne away to the sun. The larva, the chrysalis, the shell . . . left. The impulse, the searching was gone. Now there was . . . peace.

The mists seemed to clear from his brain, and with an unsettling clarity he saw and understood what he and his kind really were: an insertion in evolution, the echo of a footprint on the path of growth to the final race that one day would come out of men, out of all that had been before and maybe still would be after him. Nature always found a way to save itself. On The Day, Humanity had lost its rights. Out of the City at World's End, there would never

come a race that would reach for the stars. But now the two-legged creature that had for some time walked the earth and built stone miniature worlds for itself, had given birth to that which came after him.

Wade stayed in contact with her. Together they remembered now the flashes of golden twilight over the City, sometimes alone, sometimes in clouds. Would they ever come back? Or was earth just an ant-society to them?

Now also they understood the hate of the Force men. Like the Changers, they were driven by an instinct: survival. Deep inside, they sensed that they were meant to disappear and they desperately fought against the fact. A giant reptile of the Jura, dying, a heavy mass in the marsh, clawing at the small furry animals around it, until they drowned it under their silken masses. From far away he heard her cry, and somewhere he sensed part of a cutting pain, not in his own body. A stunning blow threw him upon the floor, but it was as if he had died already. They pulled him up and drove the two of them out in the open. Vaguely he wondered why they didn't disintegrate them, before remembering that it had no sense now. They had come too late with their guns. Willingly he followed them, only waiting for the blackness to devour him in its belly. The emptiness was already there in him, a growing black vortex, the flapping of a nocturnal wing. Something red splashed in his face, and the penetrating sudden pain bent his body. Then he only saw red with ONE eye, then nothing, and then the world suddenly was

a hurricane of pain  
breaking through the numbness  
thrilling through his nerve-ends  
tearing his brain apart

and then he started gliding in the endless pit inside himself. In the last seconds he felt himself reach out and become part of them all, her ego which he recognised and the egos of the Force men, he saw their hate, and behind the hate, the fear.

It was funny, they fearing the man they were killing, funny, so funny. His now toothless mouth formed a soundless, bloody grin. Then he went spinning towards the heart of the universe, and through the all-seeing eyes of death he saw for the first time the stars, silver tears upon black velvet, beyond the grey sky where the World stopped to exist.

THE END